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PROPER



PRIDE



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PROPER PRIDE.

PROPER PRIDE.

A Novel.

Life may change, but it may fly not ;
Hope may vanish, but can die not ;
Truth be veiled, but still it burneth,
Love repulsed—but it returneth.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON :

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PROPER PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

“THE NEILGHERRIES.”

OUR hero went to the Neilgherry Hills for the remainder of his two months' leave. It is quite beyond my pen to describe that lovely region, but in common with almost all who have ever been there I have an admiration amounting to a passion for the Blue Hills. I declare them to be the most salubrious, delightful, beautiful range in the whole world. If I were to attempt a detailed description of these most favoured hills, I should fall so far short of their per-

fections that I would only incur the wrath and contempt of their many devoted admirers, so I shall content myself by merely giving a description of Sir Reginald's journey up the Ghaut.

He arrived at the foot of the hills early one morning, having spent a night of heat, mosquitoes, and consequent madness at Mettapollium. He rode up by the old road, which is nine miles to Coonor, in preference to driving up the new ghaut, a detour of sixteen miles. His thoughts were exceedingly pleasant, and he whistled uninterruptedly for the first two miles; but after a while the beautiful scenery he was passing through engaged his attention entirely, and more than once he stopped his horse and looked about in amazed admiration. "Oh, if Alice could only see it! If she were here, what ecstasies she would be

in!" was his frequent thought. As he journeyed steadily up, the close tropical vegetation was gradually left behind, the trees assumed a more European aspect, the air lost its thick steamy feel, and became every instant more rarefied and pure. The path appeared to wind in and out through mountain-sides clothed with trees and foliage of every description; a foaming river was tearing headlong down a wide rocky channel and taking frantic leaps over all impediments. The scenery was splendid. In spite of hunger and fatigue, Sir Reginald felt as if he could gaze and gaze for hours, and yet that his eyes would scarcely be satisfied. Wild roses and wild geraniums abounded on all sides; enormous bunches of heliotrope were growing between the stones; lovely flowering creepers connected the trees, and as to the ferns——!

The graves of several engineers who had died when this old ghaut was being made were passed—poor lonely graves! and yet could those laid in them, so many thousands of miles away from their native land, desire to be buried in a more beautiful spot?

At one side towered the “Droog,” crowned by Tippoo’s old fortress. The “Droog” itself, a bold beetling hill facing south, and most precipitous, seemed to stand as sentry to this garden of India. From the top of it you could look sheer down into the plains. It was on the opposite side of the river to the old ghaut, and a long day’s outing from Coonor. On its summit were the gray broken walls of the fort, very old and much dismantled, and from which they say that Tippoo, when in an angry mood, used to toss his unhappy prisoners down to the plains below. There it was that the Mahrattas made their last stand against the British; and as

they brought an enormous amount of treasure up from their strongholds in the plains, which treasure has never been recovered, the "Droog" is considered a highly interesting place for more reasons than one. It is said that all the gold and jewels were thrown down a well somewhere just beyond the fort walls. One very old man was supposed to know of its whereabouts, but he would never divulge the secret, as he said the spot was guarded by the ghosts—devils, he called them—of many Mahratta warriors, and he was afraid to incur their displeasure.

Sir Reginald arrived in due time at Coonor, and put up at an hotel, before the windows of which there was a hedge of heliotrope cut like box at home, and so high and so dense, that you could ride at one side of it, and someone else at the other, without either being aware of their mutual

proximity. It was one mass of flowers, and smelt like ten thousand cherry-pies, and was one of the sights of the Neilgherries. Sir Reginald relaxed somewhat as regarded society, made friends with the other inmates of the hotel, and joined in picnics to all the most celebrated views. He was well known on the Toda Mund as one of the best and most inveterate of tennis-players, and carried off the first prize in a tournament which took place during his stay.

Touching the Toda Mund, there were no Todas there then; they had long removed themselves, with their black ringlets and sheet clothing, to a more remote region; but years previously the present lawn-tennis-court ground had been the home of generations of these extraordinary people.


Sir Reginald returned to his regiment

much the better for his trip, and received the congratulations of his friends on his improved appearance, and also on the discovery he had made at Cheetapore ; as what had been the talk of all that station naturally came to the ears of his brother-officers, and they boldly conversed of himself and his *wife* as if they had known all along that he had been a married man. The individual who had been so contemptuously scouted when he had declared that Fairfax was a Benedict now found himself looked upon as a man of unusual penetration—in short, a second Daniel ; and for a time his opinions were quoted at at least ten per cent. above their usual regimental value.

As for Fairfax himself, a change had certainly come over the spirit of his dream. He was an altered man ; no more headlong solitary rides, no more moping in his own

quarters. Attired in faultless garb of undoubted "Europe" origin, he was led, like a lamb, to make a series of calls among the chief notabilities of the place. "Better late than never!" they mentally exclaimed when his card was handed in, and being assured that "Missus could see," the hero of the hour followed. His history was now as well known as if it had been published in *The Pioneer*, and the ladies of Camelabad overwhelmed him with sympathy and condolence, which he accepted with the best grace he could muster; but he shrank from speaking of his wife, save in the most distant and general terms; and it was easy to see that the mock certificate was a very sore, distasteful subject.

As each succeeding mail came in he said to himself, "Surely this will bring a letter from Alice?" How he looked forward to mail-days no one knew but



himself; how buoyant were his spirits every Saturday morning, how depressed that same evening, when, tossing over the newly-arrived letters on the ante-room table, he would find one from Mark Mayhew, one from his agent, and perhaps one from his tailor, but not a line from his wife. He heard from the Mayhews that Alice had received and acknowledged the confessions; and Mark, Helen, and Geoffrey each sent him a long letter full of indignation and congratulation. The burden of each of these epistles was the same, although couched in very different style and language: it said, "Come home." "Whenever his wife endorsed their wishes, he would leave Bombay by the following mail." This was what he said to himself over and over again. Two months elapsed and no letter came—not a line, not even a message. After making allowance for

every conceivable delay, he gradually and reluctantly relinquished all hopes of the ardently-desired missive, and came to the conclusion that nothing now remained for him to think but that she wished their separation to be life-long.

One evening he mounted his horse and galloped out alone to one of his former favourite haunts, an old half-ruined temple, about six miles from the cantonment. Here he dismounted and tied his Arab to a tree, saying to himself as he ascended the steps: "There is no fear of any interruption here, and I will make up my mind to some definite plan before I return to Camelabad this evening." As he paced up and down the empty echoing ruin, he tried to judge between Alice and himself as calmly and dispassionately as if he were a third person. His own motives and actions were easily explained, but

Alice's were not so readily understood. What could be the meaning of her extraordinary conduct? His name had been cleared, and she, who should never have doubted him, and who, at any rate now, ought to be the first to come forward, had been dumb. There was but one reasonable solution. "She did not know her own mind when she was married; she never cared two straws about me, and she seizes the first pretext to free herself from a distasteful union. So be it; she *shall* be free," he muttered. "I will hold myself utterly aloof from her for the future. I shall go home and live at Looton, and surround myself with friends—shoot, hunt, and lead as gay a bachelor life as if I had no wife in existence. Why should I expatriate myself for her sake?" he asked himself aloud.

But on second thoughts this scheme did

not prove so alluring. At Looton, every room, every walk, every face would only remind him of Alice.

"I could not stand it just yet," he muttered; "it is all too fresh, too recent; one does not get over a thing like that so soon. In a year or two, when I am thoroughly hardened and indifferent, I will go; meanwhile I shall remain in the service."

The duties of his profession had their charms for him; and the society of his brother-officers was, he reflected, more welcome and more necessary to him now than ever. Weak he had always been where Alice was concerned, but for once he would be firm and be a man, and no longer an infatuated fool, following the *ignis fatuus* of a woman's caprice.

As he stood on the steps of the temple, watching the crimson sun that was slowly sinking beyond the horizon and tinting

the arid plains, the distant hills, the old temple, and Reginald himself, with the gorgeous hues of its departing splendour, "That sun," he exclaimed, as he watched the last little red streak utterly disappear, "has set on my folly and weakness; to-morrow will find me, in one respect at least, a different man. For the future I will endeavour to forget that I ever had a wife. I know it will be no easy matter to banish her from my thoughts, but I shall do my best. As a wife she is dead to me in all but name; her indifference shall be only rivalled by mine." Query: Was he not still thinking of her as he sat for fully an hour, with his head resting in his hands? He was endeavouring to dig the grave of his love, and to bury decently all the unfulfilled hopes he had cherished for so long. The moon arose, owls and bats made their appearance and flitted

to and fro, apparently unconscious of the silent figure on the temple steps. At length the pawing and neighing of his horse aroused him. He started up hastily, pulled himself morally together, and hurried down to the impatient steed, whom he unfastened and mounted, and in another moment was galloping away over the moonlit midan, leaving the old temple to the undisturbed possession of a veteran hyena and a family of jackals.

The Seventeenth Hussars had expected, as a sequel to his discovery at Cheetapore, that Sir Reginald would have returned to his ancestral halls as fast as steam could take him.

But month after month went by, and he still remained a fixture at Camelabad. He carried out his mental resolution to the letter, and left himself no leisure to think of Alice or anyone else. He returned

with the greatest energy to all his bachelor amusements, kept a string of racers, hunted the regimental pack, and made constant shooting expeditions. He played whist till the small hours, and entered into everything with the greatest zeal ; took a prominent if somewhat mechanical part in all the entertainments in the station, and was voted "charming" by the ladies, both young and old. Notwithstanding his bachelor pursuits, he developed a curious and Benedict-like interest in babies—a species of humanity that he had hitherto held in abhorrence. He cast more than one inquisitive glance on the smaller fry in arms as he went round the married quarters. And Mrs. Gifford, the wife of the only married captain in the Seventeenth, was amazed when her ayah informed her that "Sir Fairfax" had more than once taken notice of her baby, "asking age, asking boy or

girl, how soon walking?" It was most flattering, if a little mysterious, and he became a greater favourite than ever with Mrs. Gifford. She was not aware that her boy shone with a borrowed lustre in Sir Reginald's eyes for being almost the same age as his son, and that the toys and presents which were showered on him as he grew older were not bestowed altogether for his own sake.

A year after his visit to Cheetapore, Sir Reginald received a letter in Alice's well-known writing. "It has come at last," he said to himself, as with trembling hands he tore it open in his own bungalow. He drew out the photo of a sturdy dark-eyed cherub, enclosed in a sheet of blank letter-paper. At first he could hardly credit his senses; his indignation and his bitter disappointment were too great for words. His first impulse was to tear the

photo into four pieces, but, mastering this rather insane idea, he took it up and looked at it closely instead. He was glad he had not obeyed his first rash notion. The boy was certainly a splendid little fellow. Written in the corner of the carte was, "Maurice R. Fairfax, aged thirteen months." He was something more tangible now, his father thought, as he minutely studied every feature. He felt a thrill of novel and very pleasant pride as he looked at the bright eager little face, and said to himself: "This is my son. He has the Fairfax eyes and brows, I believe," he continued, as he still studied the photo critically, "but no one will deny that he has his mother's mouth."

With a sigh he pieced together the torn envelope, and looked in vain for a word; the blank sheet of paper he scrupulously turned over; it was really blank indeed.

He gazed at it for some time, as if there were actually something written on it; then, suddenly gathering himself together, he carefully folded it up and put it along with the photograph into the envelope, and locked them away in his desk.

Sir Reginald had been nearly two years at Camelabad when the outbreak which had been simmering for some time in Afghanistan came to boiling-point, and the gauntlet of defiance was thrown down by the Ameer.

Captains Campbell and Vaughan were reposing in long chairs in front of their mess, much exhausted with lawn-tennis, refreshing themselves with copious iced pegs, and enjoying a delightful experience of the *dolce far niente* as embodied in Bombay—chairs and brandies-and-sodas.

Suddenly a solitary horseman was seen

madly careering across the midan, in the direction of their lines.

"I say, just look at this fellow; his horse has bolted!" said Captain Campbell.

"Not a bit of it," replied his companion serenely; "don't you see that it's Fairfax on his chestnut, riding *ventre à terre*, as usual?"

"Hallo, Fairfax, what's up?" they shouted as he approached. "Are the barracks ablaze, and are you going for the fire-engine?"

"Better than that," he cried, clattering into the compound. "I have just come up from the general's with glorious news—we start for the front this day week."

CHAPTER II.

AFGHANISTAN.

True, a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field,
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

THE Seventeenth Hussars were duly forwarded to the frontier, and found that their final destination was Dabaule, where there was a good supply of grass and water for their horses.

Owing to the approach of winter, there was an utter stagnation of military operations, and in spite of occasional small

raids on, and from, the neighbouring Afridis, the time passed monotonously enough. The weather was cold and cheerless, but the officers of the Seventeenth, headed by their junior major, did their very best to provide exercise and entertainment for their men and for the camp in general.

Football, hockey, penny readings, and theatricals were set going with remarkable success, and helped to repel the encroachments of idleness and *ennui*. The surrounding scenery was quite different to the tiresome succession of parallel ridges presented by the ranges near the frontier. Here hill and valley were thrown together in the most admirable confusion, and clothed with short stunted shrubs and wild olives; gloomy pine-woods marked out some of the hills in bold black relief; the distant mountains were capped

with snow, and the cold at times was most intense. During the suspension of hostilities there was ample leisure for correspondence, and letter-writing was a frequent resource on a dull gray afternoon. The following is one of Sir Reginald's contributions to the mail-bag, written on his knee by the light of a small bull's-eye lantern in the retirement of his seven-foot tent:

“Camp Dabaule.

“MY DEAR MARK,

“It is not my fault that there has been such a tremendous gap in our correspondence. I have written to you again and again, and I once more seize the opportunity of the mail-dâk passing through to send you a few lines, and hope they will meet with a better fate than my other effusions, not one of which appears to have reached you, judging by your incendiary

letter. Doubtless they are in the hands of those beggars the Afridis, who rob the mails and cut the telegraph-wires continually. We are all flourishing—men in good spirits, horses in capital condition; the only thing we ask is to be up and doing. Cold weather has closed the passes to a great extent, and there is nothing whatever going on. To come into our camp you would never dream that you were in an enemy's country, we have made ourselves so completely at home, although our accommodation is not magnificent. We have all small hill-tents, weighing about eighty pounds, in which there is just room enough to turn round, and no more. We all wear thick fur coats, called poshteens, and fur caps, quite the Canadian style. You would have some difficulty in recognising me, I can tell you, were you told to pick me out from among a dozen of

fellows sitting round our favourite rendezvous—the camp-fire. There is snow on the ranges all round, and we have lots of ice without troubling the ice-machines, but hot grog is more the fashion than iced champagne.

“We arrived here six weeks ago, *via* the Khan Pass, and brought in, among other prisoners, Hadji Khan, a notorious robber and unmitigated rascal. We have him in camp now. He has the most diabolical expression I ever beheld; nevertheless, the length and frequency of his prayers are absolutely astounding. He spends more than half the day on his marrow-bones, no doubt consigning us, in all generations, to Gehenna, if you know where that is?

“The Afghans, take them all in all, are a fine-looking set of men, with bigger frames and fairer skins than the natives

of sunny Hindostan. Their physiognomy is decidedly of the Jewish caste—piercing black eyes and hooked noses, set off by a resolute, not to say savage, expression of death and extermination to all the Feringhees !

“Now, this cold weather, they are wrapped in poshteens, with or without sleeves, of very dubious cleanliness. A good serviceable garment descends from generation to generation. An enormous dark-blue puggaree encircling a little red cap forms their turban. But the headman of a village, in a richly-embroidered poshteen, ‘the woolly side in,’ like the immortal Brian O’Lynn—magnificent gold and blue turban, and long silver-mounted matchlock, is as handsome and picturesque a looking fellow as you could wish to see.

“I have not as yet had an opportunity

of beholding an Afghan lady. Some of the common women labour in the fields unveiled, a weather-beaten, bold-looking set, but the lady of the period conceals her charms behind a long white arrangement, that covers her from head to foot, like a sheet; two holes cut for her eyes, and covered with white net, give her a most ghostly and ghastly appearance. She looks like a she-‘familiar’ of the time of the Inquisition.

“We have a capital mess here, and to find such a dinner as our head kansamah serves up, after whetting our appetites by a twenty-mile ride, is a joy no words can express. After the snows break up we are sure to have a short bout of fighting, and then the campaign will be over. The English charger I got in Bombay has turned out first-class—as hard as nails and up to any amount of work. Many thanks to

Helen for the Cardigan jacket and mittens.
My love to her and the *Limbs*.

“Yours as ever,

“R. M. FAIRFAX.”

In April there was a general move on. The camp at Dabaule was broken up, and everyone was delighted to stretch themselves, as it were, and resume the line of march.

Very shortly afterwards a severe engagement took place between the brigade and a large body of Afghans. It resulted in the total defeat of the latter. Their loss amounted to one thousand, whilst the English force had only three hundred killed and wounded. The Afghans occupied a large plateau protected by walls of loose stones, and held an extremely strong position. The English brigade consisted of the Seventeenth Hussars, Fifth Goorkhas,

Twenty-seventh N. I., Fortieth Sikhs, and a battery of artillery. The enemy behaved with the most determined courage, rabble horde as they were; some merely armed with long knives and yataghans, some carrying the dear familiar Jazail, and some—oh, proud and happy men!—the British Enfield rifle. They were led by a man on a powerful black horse, who wore a prodigious green turban, and had his face whitened with ashes or some such substance. He was a very holy moolah, and harangued the multitude with an energy and vehemence only surpassed by his wild and frenzied gesticulations. Beside him stood his standard-bearer, carrying a large green flag with a red border and red inscription; and in spite of a heavy fire from the infantry, this enormous force of undisciplined fanatics advanced with the utmost steadiness and resolution. The order

to charge was given to the hussars, who bore down like a whirlwind, led by Sir Reginald Fairfax—the colonel was *hors de combat* with typhoid fever—who, mounted on a gallant English thoroughbred, cleared the low wall, and was soon laying about him in all directions.

He wrested the standard from the hands of its bearer, and striking him a tremendous blow with its iron pole, laid him low, but was speedily surrounded by some furious fanatics, resolved to regain their colours at any cost. His horse was shot under him ; however, quickly disengaging himself, sword in hand, and still grasping the green flag, he made a valiant stand against half-a-dozen moolahs, with his back to some broken masonry. It would have gone hard with him had not some of his men charged down to his rescue and beaten off the moolahs, who in another moment would

have made a vacancy in the Seventeenth Hussars and left Lady Fairfax a widow. Rid of his immediate adversaries, Sir Reginald seized a riderless horse, and making over the standard to a gunner, was soon pursuing the flying enemy, who, unable to withstand the cavalry charge, had wavered, broken, and fled; being, moreover, utterly demoralised by the loss of their standard, which they looked upon as their "oriflamme," and as a kind of holy talisman, the very sight of which alone would make the hearts of the Feringhees quail. So much had been promised on its behalf by an aged fakir, who had delivered it over to his countrymen with many prayers and profound solemnity. And it was gone—taken from their very midst by a black-hearted Kaffir, who fought like the Prince of Darkness himself.

The flying Afghans, scattered all over the plain, were pursued and ridden down by the cavalry; but the prize all sought to capture—the fakir on the black Turcoman—set every effort at defiance, and, thanks to his magnificent horse, effected his escape with almost provoking ease. Yaboos, laden with dead Afghans, were driven off the field with miraculous celerity, and within an hour from the firing of the first shot the plain was deserted.

For the capture of the standard “and displaying conspicuous gallantry on the field of action,” Sir Reginald was recommended for the Victoria Cross, a distinction his friends granted him ungrudgingly.

He was a born soldier, that was very evident. The Fairfaxes had always had a drop of wild blood in their veins. With him it took the form of fighting, instead of—as in

his ancestors' times—dicing, drinking, and duelling. His men worshipped him, and would willingly have followed him at any time and to any place, were it to the very gates of Hades itself.

"It's the good old blood that tells in the long run," remarked a trooper to his comrade over his beer and pipe. "Such a glutton for fighting as this 'ere major of ours I never did see."

At any rate, whatever was the reason, such an officer in camp and such a leader in the field inspired their utmost devotion and enthusiasm.

Although Hafiz Khan and his hordes were defeated and dispersed, they speedily rallied sufficiently to be a ceaseless thorn in the flesh to the brigade now permanently encamped within a few miles of the late scene of action. Hafiz was a striking

illustration of the saying, "He who fights and runs away will live to fight another day." He was a fakir—exceptionally holy, having made the blessed pilgrimage no less than thrice—notorious alike for his zealous piety as for his abhorrence of the accursed Kaffir. Scandal whispered that he had not *always* been such a devoted servant of the Prophet; that for years he lived in ill-odour among his neighbours, owing to his constant appropriation of their flocks and herds. Whatever may have been the truth, he was now an ardent patriot, and preyed on the Feringhees instead of on his friends. He was a most daring and successful raider, and covered himself with glory, notably on one occasion when he carried off seven hundred head of cattle from Jellalabad.

He cut off more convoys and slaughtered more grass-cutters and camel-drivers than

any other leader between Cabul and the Khyber ; and his depredations were so secretly and skilfully carried out, that his very name alone inspired the stoutest-hearted camp-follower with terror.

Invariably mounted on his superb black Turcoman, he gave chase or effected his retreat with a speed that set everything at defiance. His horse was known by the name of "Shaitan," and was supposed to be in direct communication with the Evil One, being imported expressly from the lower regions for the purpose of hunting down the infidels. The rider of this desirable mount was an elderly thick-set man, wearing a gigantic green turban, so large as almost to conceal his features. Still his hooked nose, fierce hawk eye, and bushy beard were visible ; and the treacherous, cruel, malignant expression of his face was such as a devil might have envied. Armed

with a pair of horse-pistols and a formidable yataghan, he headed a band of followers varying from fifty to two thousand, and infested an area of many miles in extent. His patriotic zeal had no bounds; he was known to have recently butchered an entire village, merely because the headman had supplied (under strong pressure) cattle and grain to the English commissariat; in short, his name far and near was a byword for ferocity and fanaticism.

One evening, Sir Reginald and his two friends, Captain Vaughan and Mr. Harvey, went for a short ride in the neighbourhood of their camp, the former mounted on his first charger, an unusually large, powerful Arab, the two latter on stout Yarkundi ponies. All were clad in Karki suits, and carried (a most necessary precaution) revolvers in their belts. The country around

was reported clear. Hafiz and his faction were said to be miles away. Certainly nothing had been heard of them for two whole days. It was a lovely evening, and tempted by the odd wild scenery they extended their ride farther than they had previously intended. At sunset they found themselves close by a straggling Mohammedan cemetery, whose large square tombs were thickly crowded together, some of them richly carved, some of them poor and plain. The graveyard was planted with magnificent cypresses, now casting long, long shadows in the setting sun. A solemn melancholy silence hung around the place; even the mud hovel, usually inhabited by the guardian fakir, was empty—a huge Afghan dog, with closely-cropped ears and tail, lay in front of the open doorway, sleeping on his post.

“Do you know that they say there is

a Christian grave somewhere quite close to this?" said Sir Reginald, looking round. "I wonder they buried him so near to these people," nodding his head in the direction of the cemetery.

"Yes," returned Mr. Harvey; "but it was probably done with an idea that he would like some company."

"Defend me from the company of an Afghan, dead or alive," returned his brother-officer, walking his horse on to where he commanded a view of the fourth side of the graveyard. His two friends followed him, and another second brought in sight a grave and plain stone cross, about a hundred yards to their right. Standing beside it was the fakir, in close and earnest conversation with no less a person than Hafiz himself—Hafiz, mounted as usual on his black Turcoman, and *alone!* Both had their backs turned to the

cemetery, and stood facing the setting sun, deeply absorbed in conversation, which they emphasized from time to time with vehement and almost frenzied gesticulation. Evidently they were hatching some evil deed.

“Hafiz, by all that is lucky!” exclaimed Sir Reginald, drawing out his revolver and putting his horse into a sharp canter. But between him and the fakirs ran a deep nullah, and ere he reached its bank they were both aware of the presence of the three hussars.

Hafiz paused for a second to glare at the intruders, then raising one arm to heaven, with a loud invocation to Allah, he turned and spat on the cross beneath him with a gesture of the utmost abhorrence and contempt, and wheeling his horse half round, with a derisive farewell to his foes, he started off at full gallop. This out-

rageous insult to their faith and nation affected the three Englishmen variously. Captain Vaughan, who was of rather full habit, became absolutely purple with passion; Mr. Harvey relieved his feelings with several round oaths; Sir Reginald said nothing, but his lips tightened under his dark moustache in a way that was ominous enough. With a vicious dig of the spurs he forced his horse down the rugged sides of the nullah, up the opposite bank, and away across the plain in hot pursuit of the holy man. The two Yarkundis, urged to the very top of their speed, joined neck and neck in the chase for a short distance, but endurance, not pace, was their *forte*, and they soon ceased to answer to the repeated applications of their riders' spurs and Annamullay canes, and began to lag behind the free-going Arab.

"It's no use, Fairfax," shouted Captain

Vaughan, pulling up; "you'll never overtake him."

"I will!" he returned, looking back for a second. "I'll catch him and kill him, if I follow him to Candahar."

His friends' remonstrances were given to the winds; he had already distanced them by a hundred yards, and soon he and the far-receding fakir became mere specks in the distance, and rounding the spur of a hill, were completely lost to sight.

The two officers waited impatiently for the sound of shots, but the silence that reigned around them remained unbroken, save for the distant cry of the jackal setting out on his nightly career, and seeming to say more distinctly than usual: "I smell dead white men, I smell dead white men."

The whistle of a kite sailing homewards was the only other sound that broke the

dead surrounding stillness. The sun had set; ten minutes previously it had vanished below the horizon in the shape of a little red speck; gray twilight was rapidly spreading her mantle over hills and plains, and our two friends, finding they had completely lost sight of their hot-headed companion, reluctantly turned their ponies' heads homewards, and retailed their adventure to their comrades round the camp-fire. These listened to it with many interruptions of surprise and dismay.

"Fairfax was splendidly mounted; that Arab of his was one of the best horses out of Abdul Rahman's stables, that's some comfort," remarked one.

"Yes, he was evidently gaining on the Turcoman when we saw the last of him," returned Mr. Harvey; "but, for all we know, Fairfax has galloped straight into the Afghan camp."

"I had no idea he was such a Quixotic fool," growled a grizzly-headed colonel, angrily kicking the logs in front of him. "It would not surprise *me* if we never saw him again."

Some said one thing, some another, but all agreed in feeling very grave uneasiness on behalf of their brother-officer.

The mess-bugle sounded and was responded to, dinner was disposed of, and still Fairfax did not appear. Meanwhile Sir Reginald, once lost to sight, had been, as Mr. Harvey remarked, overtaking Hafiz at every stride. The Turcoman had done a long day's march, and, though urged by his rider to great exertions, was no match for the well-bred Arab in his wake. The distance between them diminished gradually but surely. The black horse was only leading by thirty yards when Hafiz turned and glanced over his shoulder. It *was*,

as he had fancied, the very selfsame Kaffir who had taken the sacred standard. They were within half a mile of the Rohilla headquarters, and Allah had surely given him over for a prey into his hand. But his horse was failing, and the Feringhee would soon be at his girths. Best finish the matter at once. Reining up suddenly, he faced the approaching horseman with astonishing celerity, and drawing a pistol, which he aimed for half a second, he fired at him point-blank. The bullet missed its intended destination and buried itself deep in the brain of the Arab charger, who with one frantic convulsive bound fell forward dead on the sand, and the fakir, with drawn yataghan, charged down on the dismounted hussar, determined to have his life.

But, Hafiz, your evil star was in the ascendant. Had you but known, you would

have been far wiser to have ridden off and left your foe to find his way back to camp on foot, and to take his chance of being murdered by your prowling countrymen.

With an expression of fiendish hatred the fakir rode at Sir Reginald, his uplifted weapon ready to descend with fatal effect. But he had to contend with a man of half his age and ten times his activity, who sprang at him and seized his arm, and in so doing broke the force of the blow, which, instead of sweeping off our hero's head, as intended, merely inflicted a flesh wound in his shoulder, and before Hafiz had time to recover himself, a bullet from Sir Reginald's revolver found a lodging in his breast. Swaying heavily backwards and forwards, his powerless hands dropped reins and weapon, and he fell from his saddle like

a sack; and our hussar, catching the Turcoman by the bridle and disengaging his late master from the stirrup, sprang on his back, turned his head in the direction of the English camp, and rode off at the top of his speed.

His practised ear had caught the sounds of approaching hoofs, attracted doubtless by the shots; but still he had a start of fully a quarter of a mile, and made the very most of it. Infuriated Pathans rode hard upon his track, and it was not till he was well within the lines of the English picket, and saw their camp-fires blazing, that he ventured to draw rein and allow the exhausted Turcoman to proceed at a walk. It does not often happen to a horse to have to carry two successive riders flying for their lives within the same hour. Shaitan's drooping head and heaving sides bore witness to a hard day's work, as he

was led by his new owner within the bright circle of light thrown by the officers' camp-fire.

Exclamations, remonstrances, and questions were volleyed at Sir Reginald as once more he stood among his friends, bare-headed and ghastly pale, with the bridle of the notorious black charger hanging over one arm. Very brief were the answers he vouchsafed to half-a-dozen simultaneous interrogations.

"Hafiz was badly wounded, if not dead. He was not likely to trouble them for some time, if ever; his own charger was lying on the plain with a bullet in his brain, and affording a fine supper for the jackals. Yes, he had had to ride for it coming back, and the black was pretty well done." Here, as he came nearer to the logs, it was seen that one sleeve of his Karki coat was soaked in blood. Ques-

tions were immediately at an end, and he was hurried off by the doctor to have his wounds looked to, in spite of his urgent disclaimers and assurances "that it was a mere scratch."

The Turcoman, the sight of which acted on the Afghans as a red rag to a turkey-cock, soon became accustomed to an English bit and an English rider, and made his new master a most valuable second charger. Many were the attempts to recover him, to shoot him, to get him from his abhorred Kaffir owner at any price, but all efforts were futile, he was much too well guarded. When Sir Reginald was invalided home, he was sent down to Bombay with his other horses, and sold for a very high price to a hard-riding Member of Council; and doubtless the destination of the once feared and honoured "evil one" will be to end his days in a Bombay buggy.

CHAPTER III.

“MY CAPTAIN DOES NOT ANSWER ; HIS LIPS
ARE PALE AND STILL.”

BEYOND constant and most wearisome convoy duty, the Seventeenth Hussars had very little to do. Afghanistan is a country more adapted for mountaineers than mounted men ; and as far as downright fighting was concerned, the cavalry were, perforce, idle. Sir Reginald looked upon “baggage guard” as better than nothing. “Half a loaf was better than no bread,” and he had more than one exciting little brush with would-be marauding and murdering Pathans.

Repeatedly successful raids and small skirmishes had given him a most unenviable notoriety among the tribes of banditti who infested the various camel-roads and swarmed about the hills. To these he was a perfect scourge, and hunted them and harried them with unwearied energy. It is not too much to say that they literally thirsted for his blood. Although often warned by his brother-officers that he would be "potted," his daring and foolhardiness knew no bounds. He would loiter behind, or canter on in advance of a squadron, as coolly as if he were riding on an English high-road, and not through a gloomy Afghan pass, among whose rocks more than one enemy was sitting patiently behind his Jazail or Snider, waiting to work off any straggling Kaffirs, and so to earn for himself an honourable name.

Sir Reginald appeared to bear a charmed

life, and thoroughly to carry out the good old Irish motto, "Where there's no fear there's no danger;" and though he had one or two narrow escapes, he exemplified another saying in his own person, viz., "That a miss is as good as a mile."

The tribes in the neighbourhood of the division to which the hussars belonged had been giving a great deal of trouble, and displaying their hostility in various acts, such as constantly waylaying convoys and cutting off camel-drivers and grass-cutters. Things came to such a pitch that it was determined to bring these wretches to their senses, and a small but compact body was despatched to punish them. It consisted of three squadrons of the Seventeenth, six companies of the Two hundred and seventh, about fifty sappers, and three Gatling guns. In moving a larger force there was a difficulty about supplies, and

the pace had to be regulated in exact proportion to that of the yaboos with the column; and it was heart-breaking work to keep the poor beasts going.

The march lay at first through a narrow rocky gorge, which, after two hours' steady advance, opened into a wide flat valley that showed abundant evidence of cultivation, including many fields of wheat.

Two or three villages were reached, and proved to be empty; their inhabitants, having had timely warning, had removed themselves and their belongings, and were concealed among the surrounding hills. Late in the afternoon a march of twelve miles brought the troops to the large and important village of Ritsobi. The inhabitants had not long left; but a few sacks of bhoosa, some household cooking-pots, and one or two native ploughs were all that could be discovered; and the

soldiers were forced to content themselves with their usual rations, instead of the fowls, eggs, and fruit of which they had had visions.

The two village towers were speedily mined and blown up, and the wooden houses were easily levelled, and afforded capital fuel for the camp-fires, an unusual number of which were soon blazing in all directions.

Standing at the smallest of one of these fires was Sir Reginald Fairfax, earnestly questioning two Belooch sepoy, who, got up as fakirs, had been playing the part of spies among the enemy. The latter were assembled in formidable numbers about ten miles distant, and meant to hold their ground and await the advance of the column. To look at Sir Reginald as he stood in the firelight, one spurred boot resting on a log of wood, his face and

attitude indicating how wholly absorbing he found the sepoys' information, no one would believe that he had a thought in the world apart from his profession. The bright roaring planks lit up his face, already kindled with the news, and the eager, questioning officer before us was as different to the moody, cynical Major Fairfax of Camelabad as night from day.

In spite of hard fare, no better than a trooper's; in spite of being all day in the saddle and half the night on the alert, he had never looked better or cheerier. His constitution appeared to be of iron, and he was perfectly indifferent to cold or heat, hunger or fatigue; or if not, it was assumed that he was. His spirits and energy were untiring. The discomforts of camp life he treated as an excellent joke, and after dining heartily on ration beef and dry bread, and having kept the com-

pany entertained with his stories, sallies, and toasts, he would turn in to his seven-foot tent, wrap himself in his military cloak, and with his saddle for a pillow sleep the sleep of the just.

It was determined by the officer in command to steal a march on the enemy, and the force were under orders to set out that night. About one o'clock all the camp was astir. The moon had gone down, but the stars shone brightly—not sufficiently brightly however to make travelling pleasant, particularly for the cavalry, as the road was cut up by various watercourses and nullahs, in which more than one gallant hussar came to grief, and fished himself out with imprecations loud and deep.

After marching about eight miles the column came in sight of the enemy's fires, and a halt was made till there was sufficient light to advance. As soon as the first

streaks of dawn became visible above the horizon the cavalry were ordered to the front, and shortly afterwards shots were heard, followed by a rush of hoofs, betokening the flight and pursuit of the picket.

Two miles farther on the force reached a kotal, from whence they could see the valley beneath them. It lay before them, but not "smiling"—it was sprinkled with large bodies of the enemy, armed to the teeth, who, with standards flying and drums beating, were evidently sounding the tocsin of war. The column halted on a ridge as they saw the Ghazis slowly advancing, and bringing their guns to the front tried the effect of a few shells. The result was excellent. The enemy began to sheer off towards the hills, gradually retiring up the valley. Their movements were so rapid that the cavalry vainly manœuvred to

bring them to close quarters; they continued a steady but dignified retreat until they reached a large walled village about three miles up the valley, embedded in hillocks and groves of chunar trees. From rocks and other coigns of vantage a smart fire was opened by the enemy. The Afghan Snider is by no means a bad weapon, and cartridges from the Balar Hissar are not to be despised. Numerous isolated cragsmen among the rocks around the village made very good practice, but the main body of the enemy rounded the base of a hill and completely disappeared. It was generally supposed that they had skedaddled, but this was soon found to be a mistake. It was merely a feint to draw the Feringhees nearer to the village, in order that they might have the benefit of an enormous gun, or kind of matchlock, fired from rests in the ground. The first time it

was fired the proprietors set up a deafening cheer that echoed and re-echoed among the neighbouring hills in quite a startling manner. A second time it fired, a second hideous shout; then the three Gatlings were brought into play, and it was very quickly shut up. At the first two shots from these—to the Afghans, wholly novel inventions—they were too astounded to move; the next two sent them flying in all directions. They seemed to melt away like snow before the sun. Suddenly from behind a hillock a large body of cavalry appeared, and charged irregularly but at full gallop, very pluckily led by a man on a spotted horse, who cheered them on with loud shouts of "Kaffir! kaffir!" The hussars, only too delighted to respond to the call, were among them in a twinkling, and the affair was soon cut up into a series of hand-to-hand encounters, in which the

irregular cavalry got much the worst of it, although they fought with the utmost fury and determination. The superior arms and weight of the hussars was more than they could contend against; they were scattered, put to flight, and for a short distance hotly pursued. The hussars had eleven men wounded and a number of horses lost or disabled; this was the extent of their casualties. The defeat of their cavalry completed the discomfiture of the enemy, and the village was our own. The whole place was strewn with property left behind by its owners in their hasty retreat. The soldiers had fine times, for each of them had at least one fowl strung to his belt and an unlimited supply of fruit and vegetables. The idea of pursuing the flying foe had to be relinquished; they had taken to the surrounding rocky hills, which they climbed with goatlike

agility, and as chamois-hunting on horse-back was beyond the ability *even* of the Seventeenth Royal Hussars, they were allowed to continue their flight unmolested. One Ghazi, however, having reached what *he* considered a safe elevation, turned and waved his white standard most insolently at the little force below; but a bullet from a Henry-Martini "dropped him," and put a fatal termination to him and his evolutions. The infantry now spread all over the village and proceeded to fire it. Several of the larger buildings were already in a blaze, and many surrounding stacks of corn had been given to the flames, when an incident occurred which nearly cost Sir Reginald his life.

As he was cantering down a narrow dusty lane, he observed two men with pick-axes standing in evident hesitation before the closed door of a large square house.

Reining up his horse sharply, he asked what they were about.

“Beg pardon, sir,” replied one of them, saluting him, “but they say as ’ow the ’ouse is full of Hafghans, all harmed, and we are waiting for a party of the Two hundred and seventh before we venture inside, in case what they say is true.”

“We will soon see,” exclaimed Sir Reginald, jumping off his horse and giving the door a vigorous kick—an old rotten door it was—and another kick sent it flying open. An ill-directed volley from several Jazails greeted the intruder, and five Ghazis, armed with tulwars, made for the street.

One of the shots had taken effect in Sir Reginald’s left arm, and, parrying a desperate tulwar cut with his revolver, he closed with his assailant; but a frightful blow from the heavy stock of a native gun, delivered from behind, knocked him down

insensible, and a Ghazi was just about to give him the *coup de grâce* with a long Afghan knife when the sappers and infantry burst in and overpowered the inhabitants, making very short work of them with bayonet and revolver.

The struggle in which Sir Reginald had been engaged had not lasted more than half a minute, and when his men came up to the scene of action and found him to all appearance dead, their fury and grief knew no bounds. Two wounded Ghazis, who had been granted quarter, relinquished all hopes of life when they saw the many fierce and murderous looks that were turned on them ; and when the general, his aide-de-camp, and one of the officers of the hussars came galloping up, and they saw their faces and gestures of consternation, they felt the gratifying conviction that at any rate they had killed a Kaffir of some importance.

He certainly looked as if he was dead as he lay in the narrow little street with his head resting on the knee of his brother-officer. His eyes were closed, over his face the pallor of death seemed already to be creeping. His blue and gold uniform was torn and disfigured with dust and blood, and his left arm hung by his side in such a helpless unnatural position that it did not need a second glance to see that it was badly broken. However, he was *not* dead, only badly wounded and insensible. He was carried in a dhooly to the permanent camp (a two days' march), and the several doctors with the brigade held a consultation on his case, whilst his anxious friends, brother-officers and men alike, hung round the tent waiting for the verdict. Great was their relief to hear that, if fever did not supervene, there was nothing serious to be apprehended, but that it would be many a

day before Sir Reginald would again wield a sabre.

Still, for some time his state was very precarious, and many were the inquiries that beset the medical officer in attendance on the patient. He was a short, round-about, elderly man, with beetling brows and a gruff voice, but underneath his rough, rude exterior there lurked a really kind heart.

As he was leaving the hospital one morning he was accosted by two of the "boys" of the Seventeenth, who overwhelmed him with anxious inquiries.

"How is Fairfax this morning?" they asked in a breath.

The doctor rubbed his chin and looked at them reflectively; the two youths were connected in his mind with reminiscences of not an altogether agreeable nature, one of them, who bore the *sobriquet* of

"Buttons," being about the cheekiest and coolest young gentleman he had ever come across, and both displayed an extraordinary aptitude for practical jokes.

"He is not going to give you a step *this* time," replied the doctor brusquely, preparing to pass on.

"A step! I would not *take* it if he did," returned Buttons vehemently, standing right in front of the doctor.

"Oh, not you," retorted the medico, scornfully. "Fairfax would—nay, if he has a relapse, will—give three steps. As things are now, a man must stand on his comrade's grave for promotion, and you are just the very last young gentleman to keep yourself in the background. You would take the step sharp enough if you got the chance, and were not passed over!"

"I don't know about stepping on Fairfax's grave, as you call it," replied

Buttons, crimson with anger; "but I know some people's graves I could dance on with pleasure," accompanying the remark with a look of the utmost significance.

"Ah, you don't really mean it? Why are you all in such a desperate state about this fellow? Why is *he* singled out as an object of so much anxiety and attention? Generally, when a man dies up here, it is not 'Poor So-and-so is dead, I'm awfully sorry,' but 'So-and-so is dead—what kind of a kit had he?' And away you all tear and bid for his things before the breath is hardly out of his body! Why such great concern about this young major? He has a first-class kit, as kits go, and a couple of good sound horses."

"You are quite a new-comer, Dr. Bennett," said the other hussar, who had not hitherto spoken.

"Only a recent arrival," very loftily, "or you would not talk like this."

"Fairfax keeps us all going;" then warming to his subject, "he is the best fellow in the world, always thinking for others, always doing the work of three. He looks after the men; he manages the mess; he——"

"Ah, *now* I can understand your anxiety," interrupted Dr. Bennett, contracting his fierce brows. "The light breaks at last! The squalid feeding that is set before us, the horribly mysterious joints and leather steaks, are now accounted for. The mess butler has it all his own way now that the mess president is sick?"

"You are quite welcome to adopt this view of the subject if you like," said hussar number two very angrily; "to *some* people their food is their only object of interest."

"Well, well," said the doctor, surveying

the two wrathful young faces before him, and bursting into a loud laugh, "I must try and patch up this interesting patient of mine for many reasons, chiefly because he understands the art of snubbing bumptious boys and keeping them in their places. I am sure it is a mercy that someone can control them, for it is a task that is utterly beyond *me*," muttered the gallant surgeon-major, as he walked rapidly away to his eagerly-anticipated breakfast.

There had been a struggle among Sir Reginald's friends for the post of chief nurse; but his own man Cox would not yield the place to anyone, and they found their would-be office a sinecure. An excellent, firm, and gentle nurse himself, a worse patient than Sir Reginald could scarcely be found! So impatient of being kept in bed, so restless in it—tossing and tumbling to and fro, regardless of his wounded arm.

Perfectly deaf to all blandishments that induced him to take proper medicine and nourishment, he would have his own way, and he had it, driving his nurses to their wits' end and throwing himself into a fever.

One night, at the very height of his illness, when he was lying in a kind of stupor, the doctor came in on his way from mess and felt his pulse and temperature. Standing at the foot of the camp-bed, he eyed his patient dubiously for some moments.

"This will never do," he said, after an ominous silence. "If he goes on like this he will slip through our fingers. His pulse and temperature are past counting. I am afraid he is in a bad way, poor fellow! Some of you had better write to his friends this mail and prepare them. He may pull through, but the chances

are very much the other way. I'll look in again in the course of an hour or two." So saying, without waiting for a reply of any kind, he turned on his heel and departed.

Captain Vaughan and Mr. Harvey declared over and over to each other that they did not agree with the doctor, but each made a mental reservation to himself: "Their patient was certainly *not* mending." As they glanced anxiously towards him, they were more than ever struck by his worn and sunken features, his hurried, laboured breathing, and the startling contrast between his dark hair and the ghastly paleness of his face. "Wali," Sir Reginald's Afghan dog, a great shaggy monster, something like a collie, with dark-gray coat and pointed ears, sat on his haunches, with his nose resting on the bed, surveying his master with

grave inquiring eyes. To judge from his solemn sorrowful face, he thought as badly of the patient as did his human friends. The two officers had not forgotten the doctor's injunction, and proceeded to search over the tent for keys, desk, letters, and addresses. They found a small and most unassuming little leather desk, which they turned out and ransacked. It contained paper and envelopes, some letters, and a cheque-book, but not one of the letters was in a lady's hand, or bore the signature of Fairfax. After some discussion they agreed to write to the Honorable Mark Mayhew, who seemed a frequent correspondent. As they were tumbling out the contents of the desk they came upon a cabinet photograph, a half-length likeness of a slender girl in a white dress, with a smile in her eyes, and a fox-terrier in her arms.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Mr. Harvey, stooping to pick up the carte from where it had fallen on the floor, face upwards. "I say, who is this?" regarding the treasure-trove with wide-open eyes.

"That is his *wife*!" replied Captain Vaughan, looking over his comrade's shoulder. "Is she not lovely?"

"Lovely indeed!" replied Mr. Harvey, refusing to let the photo out of his hand, and gazing at it with the eyes of a connoisseur. "I don't wonder now that Fairfax turned up his nose at the pale-faced beauties at Camelabad! *Now* I can understand his contempt for our taste, and the commiseration with which he regarded us when we talked of beauty."

"If anything does happen to him, poor fellow," said Captain Vaughan, nodding towards the patient, "I suppose it will be an awful blow to her; but

I must confess I can't make head or tail of his domestic affairs. You may be sure there is something queer about her, or he would never stay out here alone; and he never alludes to his wife any more than if she was dead. There is a screw loose somewhere, believe me."

"You saw her on board the trooper, Vaughan; is she really as pretty as this?" murmured Mr. Harvey, still wholly absorbed in the photograph.

"*Much* prettier," returned his companion briefly. "Here! you can't go on staring at that all night! We must set to work and write this letter; the mails go down to-morrow morning. I don't half like the job, I can tell you; and if anything *does* happen to Fairfax"—here he winked away an unusual moisture in his bold blue eyes—"I shall be frightfully cut up myself."

The two officers having at length put their heads together, concocted the following letter to Mr. Mayhew :

"DEAR SIR,

"It is with much regret that I inform you of the very serious illness of Sir Reginald Fairfax, and I have been desired by the doctor in attendance to prepare you for the gravest consequences. Sir Reginald was wounded by some Ghazis after the capture of a village, he having had the foolhardiness to enter their house alone, knowing it to be full of armed men. He has a broken arm, and is only slowly recovering from concussion of the brain, caused by a blow on the back of his head ; and latterly he has had to contend with a severe attack of malarious fever. I need hardly mention that he has the best attention of my brother-officers and myself,

and everything that can be done for him in such an out-of-the-way part of the world has been most carefully carried out. We can only hope and trust that his youth and vigorous constitution may yet assert themselves and shake off the fever now wasting him away. I have been unable to find his wife's address; will you be so good as to break the news to her or forward this letter to her residence.

“Yours faithfully,

“GEORGE VAUGHAN.”

No sooner had the above been concluded, closed, and stamped than the patient suddenly woke up in his senses. After languidly gazing at his friends for some time, his eyes fell on his rifled desk and his wife's photograph. To his gesture of amazement Captain Vaughan hurriedly replied :

"Fairfax, my dear fellow, I know you think we have been guilty of the greatest liberty; but we had to ferret out your friends' address by the doctor's orders."

"Had you? Am I so bad as all *that*?" he asked in a low tone. Receiving no reply, he added, as if to himself: "I suppose I am, I feel very weak and queer; but I must write a line myself," he said, looking at Captain Vaughan gravely.

"Nonsense! It would be sheer madness. I won't allow it. One of us will write at your dictation."

"No, no! Impossible!" he answered firmly. "Not to my wife. I must write to her at any cost," he continued, raising himself feebly; and taking her photo in his hand, he gazed at it long and wistfully, then laid it down with a sigh.

"Get me a draught of that fizzing

mixture, please, and fix me up so that I can write."

Having carried his point, as usual, he commenced, with great labour, to trace a few lines, the beads of perspiration on his forehead testifying to the effort they cost him. Ere he had written twenty words the pen dropped from his fingers, and he fell back on the pillow completely exhausted.

"I see it is no use," he muttered to himself. Then looking earnestly at Captain Vaughan, he said: "You are going home; go and see her. Take her my watch and sword, they will do for the boy." He faltered, and his voice sank so low that his friend could hardly catch his next almost inaudible words; they were: "Tell her I forgive her; tell her I loved her always; tell——" Here his message came to an end, for he had fainted.

Great was the consternation of his friends, the wrath of the hastily-summoned doctor, the smothered indignation of Cox.

The patient remained unconscious for a considerable time, and when he came to himself he fell into a deep sound sleep which lasted for hours. The crisis was past; next morning he was a shade better, and from that day forward commenced a slow but steady recovery.

In six weeks' time, the regiment having been ordered back to India in consequence of the treaty of Gundamuk, he was invalided home, sorely against his will. Vainly he begged to be allowed to go to Murree—to any hill station they liked; to Australia even—for a six months' tour. But the doctors were firm—Dr. Bennett especially so—home he must go.

"There is no place that will set you up

like your native land," quoth Dr. Bennett. "That pretty young wife of yours had a narrow escape of never seeing you again. I've a good mind to drop her a line and tell her what a headstrong patient she will have to deal with."

"I beg you will do nothing of the kind," returned Sir Reginald quickly, and with visible irritation.

"Ah well! I have no doubt she has her own way of managing you, and wants no hints from me," replied the doctor facetiously, perfectly regardless of the signs and signals that Captain Vaughan was making to warn him off such delicate ground. "She'll never trust you back in India, *I'm* certain."

Whether he was to be trusted to return or not was left an open question. One thing was plain—he must leave India *now*. He reached Bombay by easy stages, and

completely restored by the sea voyage, landed at Southampton a month later, after an absence from England of nearly three years.

CHAPTER IV.

MONKSWOOD.

MONKSWOOD was the original family place of the Fairfaxes. It was from Monkswood that a Fairfax sallied forth, booted and spurred, to ride with Prince Rupert; and owing to having espoused that side, many a fair acre was shorn away from him and his descendants. Nothing, in fact, was left to the next generation but the house and demesne.

A succession of lucky speculations and prudent marriages had restocked the Fairfax purse, and Sir Reginald's grand-

father, instead of gambling and squandering at Arthur's, Crockford's, Boodle's, or White's, as was the fashion in his day—being, on the contrary, of a thrifty turn of mind—purchased Looton, which a card-playing owner had brought to the hammer, and it became the family seat. Still all Fairfaxes were at least *buried* at Monkswood, and during the season it was generally visited for woodcock-shooting, for which its thick woods were famous.

Monkswood was a good-sized red-brick house, hideous and rambling and inconvenient to the last degree. It was a rare collection of architecture on a small scale, as a room had been added here, a window knocked out there, according to the sweet will of the reigning Fairfax. It was approached by a long drive, skirted on one side by a thick laurel cover, and on the other by a broad open demesne, dotted

about with some splendid timber, oak and copper beech in particular.

The house was entered by a shallow flight of steps and heavy portico, leading into a lofty oak-panelled hall, opening on one side into the drawing-room and tea-room, and on the other into the dining-room and library.

The drawing-room side looked out on a grand old-fashioned pleasure-ground; the dining-room "gave"—oh horror!—on the yard—a yard large enough for a barrack square, with a long range of loose-boxes and deserted stalls and coach-houses. A couple of saddle-horses, and Miss Saville's fat ponies, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, revelled at least in plenty of room. Upstairs the house was still more old-fashioned than below; fireplaces in corners abounded; cupboards broke out in the strangest

places; and there were various passages leading everywhere in general and nowhere in particular, as you angrily discover when, having followed one down to its source as you flatter yourself, you open a fine promising-looking door, and find a set of empty shelves staring you in the face! On the other hand, you are disagreeably surprised when, on bursting open the door of what you take to be a cupboard, you find yourself precipitated headlong down three steps into a large room. Huge four-post beds and furniture to correspond were *de rigueur*, and there was an old-world feeling about the place altogether, as if it had gone to sleep one hundred years ago, and awoke, greatly surprised to find itself in the present century. Everything was antiquated, with the exception of new carpets and curtains in the sitting-room, a few fashionable chairs and tea-

tables, Alice's piano, and the furniture of her bedroom, where a modern brass construction relieved the time-honoured four-poster, and a writing-table, wardrobe, and lounge took the place of furniture that would have been the *ne plus ultra* of luxury in the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Need I here mention that the maiden monarch slept a night at Monkswood? According to the number of places which boast of this honour, her majesty can have rarely passed a night at home.

The house was overrun with old china, and there were a good many family portraits, simpering and scowling, about the walls. The best—the beauties and the handsome cavaliers—were all at Looton; but frosty-faced old divines and plain elderly matrons had been left undisturbed. There was some Chippendale furniture too,

and all kinds of queer old ornaments, odds and ends, and even *clothes*, stowed away carefully among the venerable wardrobes; in fact, enough unappreciated *bric-à-brac* to turn a collector's head.

The pleasure-grounds opened through a rustic gate into the plantations, which skirted the whole demesne inside a high wall. Through the plantations ran a walk just wide enough for two. A dense growth of underwood gave cover to thousands of rabbits, and where the ground was visible it was one mass of blue-bells and primroses in the season.

Opening also out of the pleasure-grounds was a large old-fashioned garden, chiefly devoted to fruit and vegetables, though the broad gravel walks that intersected it were lined with wallflowers, carnations, lavender, and hollyhocks. Its four gray walls did not look down upon a "wealth of flowers,"

but they were covered with very excellent fruit trees, and they overlooked the best beds of asparagus within a radius of ten miles.

CHAPTER V.

WAITING FOR AN ANSWER.

ALICE had found all prepared for her reception at Monkswood. A moderate staff of servants, culled from Looton, was awaiting her arrival. They accorded her a cold, not to say sullen, welcome; as they unanimously blamed her, and her alone, for their master's sudden freak of shutting up Looton and sailing for India. Their attitude of dignified disapproval was entirely thrown away on their young mistress, who spent most of her time out of doors, and quickly accustomed herself to a life

of complete solitude. In company with her dog Tory, a fox-terrier, given her by her husband before she was married, she would spend hours roaming through the garden and pleasure-grounds, and, above all, the woods. They had a special attraction for her—she liked their aromatic piny smell, and they were leafless, deserted, and dreary, and seemed exactly to match her own frame of mind. Here, in utter solitude and silence, only broken by the snapping of a twig beneath her feet, the flutter of a falling leaf, or the short sharp barks of Tory in hot pursuit of a rabbit, she could think without interruption.

To Tory these woods were Elysium itself, and his most happy hunting-grounds. Although always baffled by the agile bunny, he returned to the chase each day with renewed enthusiasm. As he sat, much out of breath, on his haunches directly in front

of his mistress, seated on a log, his eyes rolling, his tongue lolling, and his sides palpitating, perhaps he wondered in his own mind what could be the matter with her. Why did those great round drops roll down her cheeks and go splash on her sealskin coat and small clasped hands? Why did she take him up, and hug him, and kiss him, and say: "Tory, no one in all the world loves me as well as you do"?

Although Alice had spoken to Geoffrey of her husband's departure with easy indifference, her indifference was assumed. Her heart quailed when she thought of India, sickness, and the field of action. Each day, instead of deadening, only intensified her grief. It will be seen that her feelings towards her husband had undergone a revulsion, and since she had been out of the hearing of Miss Fane's oracular sayings, her opinion of his misdeeds had

become greatly modified. If he was utterly innocent, as in her secret heart she began to believe, what was to be her fate? Twice he had given her an opportunity to make amends, and twice she had declined the olive branch. She would never have another chance, *that* was very certain.

As she looked down the dreary path before her, strewn with fallen leaves and branches, at the bare, gaunt, gray and brown trees interlaced overhead, it was not a cheerful prospect; and yet a far more dismal vista presented itself to her mind's eye. A long, solitary, monotonous life at Monkswood, where youth and beauty would alike fade away unnoticed and unregretted; her husband implacable, following with ardour his beloved profession; her friends indifferent and forgetful; what a miserable existence seemed to be in store for her! Could the haughty stern man, who had

so bitterly upbraided her on Southsea Pier, and bidden her such a cold and almost contemptuous farewell, have been the bridegroom who had sauntered by her side through the deep green glades of the forest of Fontainebleau? It seemed impossible. What delightful mornings they had spent among those old trees—she with her work, he lying at her feet reading aloud Tennyson, *Punch*, *Galignani*, whatever came first; what rambles they had taken among French farms and fields, exchanging tastes, opinions, confidences; what delightful drives and excursions they had made in the neighbourhood, exploring the country in every direction, losing their way, stopping to dine at little out-of-the-way villages, and meeting with numerous amusing adventures.

Then there had been that short trip through Normandy, and home by the Channel Islands; and what a welcome she

had received at Looton!—rich and poor testified their regard for its master by the reception they gave his bride. . How proud he had seemed of her in those days, as, dressed in one of Worth's gowns, which he had helped to choose in Paris, he led her up to the Duchess of Dover, who was giving a ball in their honour—the very last she had been at. How she had enjoyed it too, although Reginald never danced with her *once*, telling her, when she remonstrated with him as they went home in the brougham, "That he did not approve of bride and bridegroom dancing together, as they had quite enough of each other's company, and might spare a few hours to the claims of society;" and he had cut short all her arguments with a kiss. She remembered saying to him the day that Geoffrey had been expected: "I suppose we may consider our honeymoon over

now?" "No," he had replied, "I hope ours will last as long as we live, and that, no matter what happens, we shall never love each other less than we do at present. I can answer for myself, at any rate," he had said emphatically.

Rash promise! Three months of unutterable happiness, and all was over! That he *had* loved was certain. Never a very demonstrative lover; yet a look, a word, a caress from him were ten times more precious from their rarity, and because they bore the stamp of a tender, almost reverent affection, than if another man of more shallow feelings had overwhelmed her with perpetual adoration.

Such thoughts as these, and such happy recollections, only made the contrast between past and present trebly painful. Day by day, Alice became more miserably unhappy. She spent her time aimlessly wandering

about the woods or sitting indoors before the fire, with Tory on her lap, talking half to him and half to herself. Society she had none: with the exception of the clergyman's family, the neighbours and county held completely aloof, and left her entirely to her own devices. They knew that Sir Reginald had gone abroad, that Looton was shut up. "There is something very mysterious about the whole thing," they said, "and we will not be in a hurry to call on Lady Fairfax."

Consequently Lady Fairfax was left entirely to herself.

At last Alice made up her mind to write to her husband. She could no longer believe in that false marriage certificate; it was all a wicked lie from first to last. Oh that she had thought so before! She had determined to abase herself before him and entreat his pardon. These feelings

came to a climax one dim spring afternoon, and, hastily glancing at the paper, she saw that it was mail-day. She had just half an hour before post time, and so she hurriedly sat down and wrote a short but truly penitent and loving letter to Sir Reginald (the fate of which will afterwards be disclosed).

“What a change in her life that single sheet of foreign paper might make,” she thought, as she kissed it and folded it, and enclosed in it two or three violets taken from a little bunch in front of her dress. Ere the letter had gone out of the house a load seemed lifted off her mind. In eight weeks at most the answer would come back; and the foolish girl sat down on the hearth-rug and began to reckon up the days!

“He will come back himself,” she whispered to Tory, as he laid his head on her arm and blinked his eyes sagaciously.

“And how glad we shall be to see him, Tory, you and I! He will sit between us here, at the fire, and he will scold me. He will lecture me dreadfully, Tory, but he is sure to be very pleased with you. I will tell him what a good boy you have been, and how you have kept me company.”

In vain she watched and waited for an answer to her letter. Every morning, wet or dry, accompanied by Tory, she walked to the avenue-gates, and herself received the post-bag. How she looked out for the arrivals of the mails *vid* Brindisi, and reckoned up the days and hours till her much-desired letter could come! When the allotted two months had elapsed, and it did not appear, hope, instead of being silent, told a still more flattering tale.

“He is coming himself; he may be here any day,” it said. For days, and even weeks, Alice deluded herself with this

idea. A step, the sudden opening of a door, made her start and flush crimson. But time went on, her boy was born, and still no letter; so her heart hardened once more. Not only was she herself slighted and despised, but what outraged her feelings in their most sensitive point, her child was ignored. "He might have sent me even one little line; he is barbarous, cruel, unnatural," were some of her bitter reflections.

Miss Saville, a good-tempered, sensible, elderly lady, very fond of her niece, had come to Monkswood, and with her a new *régime* commenced; no more untouched meals, no more "moping," as she called it, permitted. But now that Alice had her baby to engross her mind, she was not so much inclined to live in the past as in the present. When she did think of her husband, it was with an indescribable

mixture of remorse, indignation, and regret. The "confessions" from Cheetapore were duly forwarded to Alice, and were safely locked up in her dressing-case; but as he had not deigned to take any notice of her abject apology before the matter had been cleared up, it was unnecessary to trouble him with another appeal, even supposing her own pride would have permitted a second abasement, which it would not.

When not occupied in the nursery, Alice spent a good deal of time in taking long rides in the neighbourhood. In company with Martin, the old family groom, she scoured the country for miles far and near, very much to her own enjoyment and greatly to the indignation of the surrounding *élite*, who had no idea that a young woman sent to Monkswood by her husband in the deepest disgrace should be permitted so much relaxation and amusement. Her horses were

first-rate, her riding undeniable, and once in the saddle she half forgot her troubles, and seemed more like herself once more. The perfect equanimity with which she met the cold hard stare of the county people, and the inimitable grace with which she managed her thoroughbred, made them feel—the ladies especially—more wickedly disposed towards her than ever.

The whisper of scandal was busy with her name in a way that she, poor girl, had little idea of; and stories were circulated that would have made her absent husband's blood boil had he only known. The accepted legend was, "that she had been on the point of eloping with her cousin, Mr. Saville, during her husband's temporary absence; that he had fortunately returned just in time to frustrate their plans, and, to save a public *ésclandre* and

the Fairfax good name, had relegated his erring wife to Monkswood, and had himself volunteered for the East." •

"But she is all the same as a *divorcée*. He has left her for ever," her kind neighbours whispered over their five-o'clock tea; "and she is not to be tolerated in Steepshire society."

The Mayhews occasionally sent Sir Reginald's missives to his wife, and she observed that, although her boy was often alluded to with interest and affection, her own name was never mentioned. She had done violence to her pride in sending him Maurice's photograph, and he had treated it with the same disdain as her letter.

When the Afghan war broke out, all his epistles to Mark or Helen were regularly forwarded to her, and she received the news of his having gained the Victoria

Cross with a pride that she did not attempt to conceal; but her fears and anxieties far outweighed any pleasure the intelligence afforded her. It did not delight her to hear that he had gained the *sobriquet* of "Fighting Fairfax"—far from it; and when Captain Vaughan's letter arrived her agony was beyond description. How she bore the miserable week that intervened before the next mail was only known to herself. She endured in silence, opening her heart to no one—taking no one into her confidence; not shedding a single tear, but going about her usual duties with a white set face that fairly frightened her aunt. "If he is dead," she would say to herself as she paced her room, "he has gone without forgiving me. As I stand here he may be already weeks in his lonely foreign grave, and I, without knowing it, am his widow. If this is the case, I believe it

will kill me." Never very robust at any time, she looked now so worn, so thin, so altered, even with the suspense of less than a week, that it seemed as if it would not take much to snap her hold on life.

She heard from the Mayhews of her husband's approaching return, and saw by his letters how very reluctant he was to come home.

He little knew that his wife's eyes would rest on the lines he was penning when he said :

"I have no wish to return to England; I am ten times happier out here than I shall be at home; and excepting to see you and Helen, and my son and heir, I do not wish to set foot in my native land for years. All my interests and all I care about most are bound up in the fortunes of the Seventeenth Royal Hussars. I hope to get command of the regiment ere

long, and if I do I would not change places with any king or emperor you could name."

Alice read the above with apparent composure and handed it back to Helen, to whom she was paying a short visit. Indignation and disappointment were depicted in her face, in spite of her heroic efforts to appear indifferent. She went and stood at the window, to hide the tears that would come into her eyes.

"He does not mean it, Alice," said Helen soothingly.

"It is nothing to me whether he does or not," replied Alice hotly, "but he does mean it; at any rate we will not talk about him." Then continued, with womanly consistency: "I can read between the lines of that letter. *I* am the cause of his reluctance to come home; he does not wish to be in the same country with me; he hates

to remember that he is a married man ; he is afraid that we shall meet ; but he need not be. England is wide enough for both of us, and I have no wish to see a husband who has completely ignored me for nearly three years." So saying, and rapidly collecting her hat, umbrella, and gloves (having just come in from the park), she swept indignantly out of the room.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE.

THREE years had made a wonderful change in Alice: she was a very different Alice to what she had been when we first saw her at Malta. Her naturally high spirits and elastic temperament had been almost totally subdued and crushed by the life of retirement and isolation she had led. She felt, although barely twenty-one, as if she had already lived her life: the happiness, gaiety, and domestic sunshine, the common lot of girls of her age, was not for her, an outcast from society, a deserted wife. Sometimes

her youth and natural buoyancy would assert themselves, and she would find herself singing and laughing as of old, especially as she played with Maurice, and allowed him to drive her as his willing steed up and down the passages and round the garden ; but such were rare occasions.

The mistress of Monkswood was a tall, slight, dignified young lady, who often inspired her aunt with awe by the gravity of her demeanour, and who found it hard to realise that she and the madcap child of former years were one and the same individual. She utterly refused to leave Monkswood, and, with the exception of a flying visit to the Mayhews, had never been away from home for one night. Nor did she encourage people to stay with her, saying she had no inducement to offer, and that it was much too stupid

at Monkswood to repay anyone the trouble of coming so far.

At length her aunt, Miss Saville, greatly concerned by her niece's listlessness and dejection, took upon herself to invite Miss Ferrars, one of Alice's former companions, on a long visit. "The young," she rightly argued, "like the young; her former school-fellow will cheer her up. After all, an old woman like myself is no companion for a girl from one year's end to another."

Miss Ferrars duly arrived at Monkswood. She was a year older than Lady Fairfax, a clever, warm-hearted girl, with untiring spirits and energy. She was tall and well developed, and looked twice as much the matron as her slim girlish hostess. She had a pleasant, intelligent, rather than handsome face, with sparkling brown eyes, and quantities of beautiful bronze-coloured

hair. She was unaffectedly surprised at the change in her former schoolfellow. Could this silent, grave, melancholy-looking young lady be indeed the bright Alice of Rougemont, who used to keep them all alive with her bright face and gay sallies?

Soon they relapsed into their old groove, however, going over their former experiences with mutual pleasure. Professors, schoolfellows, examinations, places, and people were reviewed and discussed, and Alice took her friend into her confidence on every subject save one. Her Bluebeard's closet, her sealed book, was her husband's name, and *that* she always most scrupulously avoided. To her friend's inquiries about him her answers were cold and brief; her short married career she never touched upon, and Mary Ferrars having indirectly heard that Sir Reginald did not "get on" with his wife, and was anything but a highly-

domesticated animal, seeing that he had been abroad for nearly three years, never alluded to him again.

Miss Ferrars and Alice shared the same room, and though they would lie awake talking for hours in the most approved young-lady fashion, nothing had escaped Alice's lips that gave her friend any clue to the mystery which enshrouded her husband. She roused herself for the entertainment of her schoolfellow, and became every day more like her old self. She purchased a tame sedate steed for her use, and gave her riding lessons, and together they explored the neighbourhood. They got up a lawn-tennis in the pleasure-grounds, where they played half their mornings, making Maurice very useful in fetching the balls.

Maurice was now a young gentleman in belted blouse, sturdy and well-made. He

had a fair broad forehead, dark eyes, dark lashes, and dark curls. He already possessed a very decided will of his own, and was absolute master of all the womenkind on the premises, from Alice to the cook inclusive.

The two young ladies had effected a great change in the interior of the house. The drawing-room was now a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. They had routed out old pictures and hung them on the walls; the Chippendale furniture had been brought to the front, and some beautiful old china had been arranged on a venerable black buffet that had been discovered in the laundry; more plates and dishes were affixed to the walls on velvet shields; in fact, the drawing-room and tea-room were their mutual hobby, and became two of the most charming apartments possible to see, with polished floors and Persian rugs.

June and July passed—a vision of

hot, sweet-scented, languid summer days. Then came August; and August brought a visitor to Monkswood.

Meanwhile Sir Reginald had landed at Southampton and made his way to London, where he was rapturously received by the inmates of Wessex Gardens. They thought him graver, thinner, and very much sun-burnt from the voyage, but otherwise he was the same as ever. The day following his arrival he produced presents for all the Mayhew family — an Afghan matchlock and knife for Mark; a Cashmere tea-set and shawl for Helen; toys, puzzles, and sweetmeats for the children.

Helen, having tried on her shawl and viewed herself with much complacency in all the mirrors and from every point of view, came over to where Sir Reginald was explaining a puzzle to the children, and,

throwing herself into a chair opposite, said abruptly :

“And what have you brought Alice?”

“Alice!” he stammered, reddening even through the sunburn to the roots of his crisp dark hair. Then immediately recovering himself, replied, as he stooped to pick up a piece of the puzzle which had fallen on the floor: “Oh, nothing.”

“Has he not brought her *himself* and his V.C.?” said Mark, giving him a tremendous slap on the back. “What more could she desire?”

“I am not so humble as to consider myself *nothing*, whatever you may think of me, Mark,” he returned, without raising his eyes from the puzzle, which he had just completed in the neatest manner; and, holding it out on the palm of his hand, he said: “Now, Hilda, if you put this together before dinner this evening I’ll

give you the biggest box of chocolate you ever saw. I'm off to the club now," he added, standing up and preparing to depart, cleverly eluding the fire of cross questions with which Helen was preparing to attack him.

For several days he evaded all her attempts to inveigle him into a *tête-à-tête*; his engagements were so numerous that he was seldom at home, for all his old friends flocked round him, and he was the hero of the hour. Dozens of invitations came daily pouring in, and he seemed to be fairly launched in London society, and carried away by its current. Helen, like the hen whose duckling had taken to the water, looked on in impotent despair. The highest in the land, the beauties of the season, were all equally ready to engage his time. As she saw him in the Row, the centre of a circle of former

brother - officers, then beckoned to the carriage of one of the belles of the season, who engaged him in most animated and *empressé* conversation, she said to herself : "This will never do ; has he forgotten that he has a home and a wife, or does he mean to ignore both completely ?" She sought in vain for opportunities to sound him on the subject ; he never was with her alone. All her little hints about Alice, all her endeavours to bring her name into conversation, were completely fruitless ; he exhibited a skill in avoiding this one particular theme, a dexterity that irritated and amazed her. At length, after he had been nearly a fortnight in London, Helen made up her mind to stand this state of affairs no longer. Accordingly, the evening when he was dining at the Guards' Club, she waited up for him in her boudoir. Hearing him leisurely ascending the stairs

between one and two o'clock, she went out into the corridor and beckoned him into her room, saying :

"Come in here, Regy ; I want to speak to you."

Strangling a yawn, and laying down his candlestick, he flung himself into the nearest arm-chair with a mock tragic gesture, and said : "Say on."

It was all very well to say "Say on," but how was she to begin? Now that she had caged her bird she began to realise the delicate task that lay before her. She well knew that it was a proverbially thankless and dangerous mission to interfere between husband and wife ; and Regy, although he had often stood a little boy at her knee, and come to her with all his grievances, was now a man, known to be clever, distinguished, and thoroughly able to think and act, not only for himself

but for others. How well he looked in his mess-dress, so bronzed, soldierlike, and handsomer than ever! He was leaning back with his arms clasped behind his head, regarding her with lazy amusement.

She must begin, she thought, *somehow*, and forthwith broke the ice clumsily enough by saying: "Had you a pleasant evening, Regy?"

"A pleasant evening!" he echoed. "Why, you foolish old lady, you never mean to say that you have sat up till nearly two o'clock to ask me such a question?"

"No, not quite," she replied, laughing nervously. "The truth is, Regy—and don't think I am inhospitable, or want to turn you out, or anything——" And she paused.

"Well, and what is the truth, as you call it?" he asked brusquely.

"When are you going to Monkswood?"

"To Monkswood!" he repeated, suddenly sitting erect and looking at her fixedly. "That is easily answered—never!"

"Oh Reginald, you can't mean it! Do you not wish to see Alice or your boy?"

"We will not speak of Alice, if you please," he said gravely. "I have nothing to say to her; but you must manage that I shall see the boy somehow, Helen," he added eagerly. "Could you get him up here for a few days? I'm off to Norway with Fordyce the end of the month."

"I am quite *sure* that Alice would never allow him out of her sight, and I will never have him here without his mother. Do you mean me to understand that you will not suffer me to speak to you about her?" she asked hotly.

"I do. Not even with you, Helen, my

more than sister, will I discuss my wife—that was.”

“Then,” exclaimed Helen with rising indignation, “things are at a deadlock. Alice will not speak of you to anyone, you will not suffer me to mention her name, and neither of you will have anything to say to the other. I know I could reconcile you both, were you not so inconceivably proud and stiff-necked.”

“Look here, Helen,” he said, rising and beginning to pace about the room, “I know you mean well and kindly, but take my advice and leave us alone. We get on best apart. Our marriage was a tremendous blunder; we both know that now. I have endeavoured to forget that I have ever had a wife. Alice and I are utter *strangers*. As her guardian, I have taken excellent care of her interests, and studied her comfort and happiness as far

as it is in my power ; but as her *husband* " (and he emphasized the word), "I have done with her."

Hitherto he had been walking up and down the room, but as he concluded he came to a full stop before Mrs. Mayhew, who, rising and stretching out her plump white hands towards him with a gesture of dismay, said :

"Are you mad, Reginald, to talk like this? You do not know *what* you are saying. It is very easy to repudiate your wife to *me* ; but when you do it publicly what will people say? Have you thought of that? What would you yourself say of a young couple who married for love, separated almost in their honeymoon, the husband to go to India, the wife to shut herself up in the country?"

"I would say nothing," he interrupted. "Why should I?"

"Wait ! I have not finished," she continued hastily. "The husband, after an absence of three years, returns ; comes to London, mixes freely in society, but never goes to see his young wife. You must remember," she pursued, literally button-holing him by his mess-jacket, "that you are Alice's guardian as well as her husband ; she has no father or mother, nor any relation in the world to protect her good name except yourself and Geoffrey, and he is only a boy."

"Geoffrey !" he exclaimed contemptuously.

"You don't know what you are doing, Regy," she pleaded. "If you go abroad, as you have arranged, without seeing Alice, you will do her a great injury in the eyes of the world. Your friends know that there is an estrangement between you ; at least

for the sake of appearances, patch up a truce at any rate."

"I am not a hypocrite, and I will do nothing of the kind," he muttered angrily, drawing back and endeavouring to release himself from his cousin's grasp.

It was useless; she was a pertinacious woman, and she *would* be heard.

"Do not go," she entreated. "I never see you alone now, and I must gain my point—I must indeed. You *will* hear me. It is all very well to say you have ceased to think of Alice as your wife—which I do not believe—but, at any rate, you cannot forget that she is the mother of your child, can you?" she asked, with an air and emphasis that would not have disgraced Mrs. Siddons.

No reply. "Silence gives consent, I see," she nodded triumphantly as she continued; "and as the mother of your

child, surely you would wish her to be honoured and respected, if not for her own sake at least for his?"

An impatient gesture of assent was all his reply.

"Think of the life of retirement and seclusion she has led; surely that has been punishment enough?"

"Who is talking of punishment?" he exclaimed, forcibly removing Helen's hand. "Alice is her own mistress, to come and go as she pleases."

"She has never left home nevertheless, in spite of all our invitations, with the exception of a short visit this spring. You don't know the *furor* she created; we used to be quite mobbed walking in the Row."

A very unamiable scowl was the only notice he deigned to this remark.

"You have no idea how lovely she is," she urged impressively.

"Have I not?" he replied dryly.

"No; how can you?—you have not seen her for ages. She is greatly changed in every way; no longer the giddy, impulsive girl you remember. If you only knew how *distracted* she was when you were so dangerously wounded!"

"Pray how can you tell?" he asked with raised brows and a certain amount of sarcastic incredulity in his expression.

"I know all about it from Miss Saville. She told me that during the week that followed Captain Vaughan's letter Alice fretted away to half her size, and that her grief and misery were painful to witness."

Perceiving that he was gradually wavering, she urged:

"You will *have* to go down to Monkswood, my dear Regy, if only for the sake of public opinion. Go as her guardian at

any rate ; putting your wife aside, it is your duty to go and see your ward. You will go, if only for a few days," she entreated anxiously.

"Yes, I will go," he replied slowly and with an evident effort. "I never looked at the subject from your point of view before. I see that it is necessary for me to study appearances, but I only go as her *guardian*, recollect. You are very eager in the matter, Helen, and very pressing," he added with a smile, "but Alice is by no means so anxious to see me as you imagine."

"She is ! she is !" cried Helen, in whose case the wish was father to the thought. "And as for *you*," laying her hand affectionately on his shoulder, "you know you are very fond of her all the time, and that in your heart you are dying to see her ; now are you not ?"

“What would be the good of telling you?” he replied evasively. “At any rate, Alice does not care two straws about me. I know her far better than you do, Helen, wise as you think yourself. I know her *private* opinion of me; but confidences between married people are sacred,” he added with a bitter smile. “I suppose she knows that I have come home?” he asked abruptly after a short silence.

“Oh yes; I wrote and told her of your safe arrival.”

“And what did she say?” he inquired with unconcealed eagerness.

“Well, strange to say, Regy, she never answered my letter. “But then, you know,” she added with an awkward laugh, “what a very bad correspondent she is.”

“A very bad correspondent as you say,” he replied, with such emphasis that Helen looked at him amazed.

"Tell me, Regy, has she never written to you?" she inquired with solemn eyes.

"Then to-morrow or next day I shall start for Monkswood," he observed, coolly ignoring her question.

"Do, my dear boy," returned Helen with effusion; "you don't know how glad I am to hear you say so. "Mark and Geoffrey and I will follow you the end of the week and pay a visit to Alice, which your arrival has somewhat postponed."

"Well, now I suppose I may go to bed?" said Reginald, taking up his candle and looking at his cousin interrogatively. "You have said your say, and carried your point, have you not? I am not at all sure that you are not sending me on a fool's errand, Helen."

"I am very sure that I am *not*, Regy. You will be grateful to me some day, though now I daresay you think me a

meddlesome, tiresome busybody. You look awfully tired and fagged, so I won't keep you up any longer. Good-night!" she concluded, holding up her cheek to be kissed.

As the door closed on him, a triumphant smile broke over her face. "*He* is all right, at any rate. If Alice were as easily managed or talked over all would be as it ought to be in no time. I am only sorry I did not make this opportunity before," said Mrs. Mayhew aloud, as she turned to seek her well-earned repose, firmly persuaded that she had achieved a triumph of *finesse*.

Sir Reginald kept his promise, and went down to Monkswood "solely in the character of Alice's guardian," he kept telling himself. "Perverse girl, *never* would he own her as his wife, until she had made complete submission," and yet in

his heart of hearts how ardently he longed to see her! How he recurred again and again to what Miss Saville had told Helen! If they met alone, who could tell but that she would encircle his neck with her slim fair arms and whisper a petition for forgiveness, for pardon—if she only knew how readily, how eagerly he would grant it!

The nearest station to Monkswood was Manister, a cathedral and garrison town five miles off. Here he procured a fly, and with Cox and a portmanteau started without delay. Arrived at Monkswood, he told the driver to go round to the yard and get refreshments for man and beast, and desiring his servant to see that his old room was got ready, he sprang up the steps. The hall-door was wide open, and he met Miss Saville sallying forth in a large garden-hat, her

hands protected by chamois-leather gauntlets and her dress tucked up in a businesslike manner. She was exceedingly astonished, and beckoning her nephew-in-law into the library, overwhelmed him with questions. In reply to one of his, she said that Alice was still far from robust, or as gay and happy as she could wish to see her, but that she was wonderfully improved since Miss Ferrars had been with her. "They were both in the grounds, drinking tea under the cedar; should she go and prepare them?"

"No, certainly not; unless it would give Alice a shock; and he supposed she knew that he was in England?"

"Yes, she heard of your arrival some days ago; but I think she scarcely expected to see you here," replied Miss Saville.

“Did she not? And why not, may I ask?”

“Do not inquire from me, Reginald; you and Alice are the best judges of your own affairs. I have never interfered in any way, as you are aware. Alice is the proper person to answer your question. Naturally, she is deeply hurt; I can see that. You have never sent her one line since the birth of your son; but I am not in her confidence.” A footman, who had just entered, was quietly motioned away during this conversation, and went downstairs in great excitement.

“Well, I’m blessed, Mrs. Morris, if there isn’t a strange young man in the library, and the old lady a-holding forth to him like one o’clock, and he signs me out of the room as cool as you please!”

"What is he like?" inquired a chorus of maid-servants.

"Oh, he's a tall dark swell, that looks as if the whole place belonged to him."

"And so it does," said Cox, his man, coming in and banging down his dressing-case. "If he is not master here, I'd like to know who is?"

"Lor', Mr. Cox, what a start you have give us! And is it really Sir Reginald himself?" cried Mrs. Morris, rising.

"You can use your eyes, Mrs. Morris; there he goes down the steps."

An immediate rush was made to the window to catch a glimpse.

Yes, sure enough there he was, walking towards the pleasure-grounds with Miss Saville.

"Thank God, he looks well and strong!" said Mrs. Morris with fervour, following

his retreating figure with tears in her eyes.

"My! what a handsome gentleman!" exclaimed an enthusiastic housemaid. "If *he* does not suit her she *is* hard to please, isn't she, Polly?"

"Brown, please to remember yourself," said Mrs. Morris sharply.

"Not but that," she added, relaxing, "all the Fairfaxes are good-looking. Many a time I carried him in my arms, the same as I do Master Maurice. Ay, it seems but the other day."

"I little thought you would ever see him again alive, ma'am; it was touch and go with him once, I can tell you," observed Cox gravely.

"I must go now and see about dinner," seizing her keys and bustling about, "but you will tell me all about it when you

dine with me by-and-by, Mr. Cox," said Mrs. Morris, as, followed by the footman and housemaid, she hurried from the room.

CHAPTER VII.

“MARY, IT IS MY HUSBAND!”

ALICE and Mary were to be found under the cedars, a very favourite resort of theirs those August evenings. A round wicker table stood between them, upon which were all the requirements of afternoon tea. Alice, leaning back in a low garden-chair, was reading to Mary, who was knitting, “A Princess of Thule.” How pretty she looked! The sun, glancing through the sombre branches, fell in stray flecks on her hair and dress—a white cambric trimmed with quantities of lace

and knots of pale-blue ribbon. She was twirling a carnation in her fingers as she read. But there was a grave melancholy expression in her downcast face, sad to see in one so young. Coming to the end of a chapter, she paused and exclaimed, looking up :

"Well, I must confess, the Princess of Thule ran away from her husband on very small provocation. Don't you think so, Molly?"

Molly, instead of replying, said, as she gazed intently over Alice's head :

"Why, who is this young man coming over here with Miss Saville?"

"Young man?" echoed Alice indifferently, and without turning her head; "oh, it must be the postmaster. Auntie promised him a quantity of geranium and carnation cuttings."

"Does the postmaster wear well-cut

clothes and a dark moustache? Is the postmaster a gentleman?"

"No, you ridiculous girl," turning and looking over her shoulder. After a minute's dead silence, "Mary," she gasped, "it is my husband!"

Her face was deadly pale as she raised it to her friend's, and letting the book slip from her knees, she rose and leant against the tree with both her hands pressed to her heart. The cedar was between her and the house, and she had time to recover herself a little before her husband joined them. As he approached she looked at him keenly. Had he borne the traces of his recent wounds and fever, and looked a war-worn invalid, her woman's heart would have melted instantly, but as he came across the grass his step was as buoyant, his eyes as keen, and his bearing as gallant as ever. A thousand thoughts seemed to crowd to her

brain, her heart beat as though it would choke her, she was trembling from head to foot; as, with all the composure she could muster, and without meeting his glance, she gave him her hand in silence.

Miss Saville promptly introduced Mary Ferrars.

"You and I ought to be friends, Miss Ferrars; I was your brother's fag at Eton, and many a thrashing he gave me. Don't you think that that constitutes a tie between us?"

He made the above speech in order to give Alice time to compose herself; and self-possessed as he seemed, his heart was bounding wildly too.

"I hope you are now quite strong, Alice," he said, looking at her with evident concern, for her face was as pale as ashes.

"Quite, thank you," was her laconic reply as she seated herself. Her knees

were trembling so that she dared not, and could not, stand any longer.

"Give us some tea, my dear," said Miss Saville, who fortunately appeared to grasp the situation, and tea was made; and as it was handed about a certain amount of conversation began to circulate. London, and Reginald's visit to the Mayhews, his passage home, the latest news from the East, formed in turn topics of discourse. Alice scarcely opened her lips. Sir Reginald might have been a casual visitor, who had just dropped in, for all the warmth, sympathy, or interest displayed by his wife. A more uncomfortable quartette seldom took tea together. No one would suppose that the pale haughty-looking girl and the dark bronzed young man, so leisurely sipping his tea, were husband and wife, and had only met within the last ten minutes after a separation of years. Mary Ferrars

gazed from one to the other in silent amazement. Although outwardly calm, conflicting emotions were waging war in their bosoms.

She was thinking: "If I don't manage to get away I shall disgrace myself—I shall burst out crying. This lump in my throat will choke me." *He* was thinking: "Helen was dreaming. This notion of hers was one of her most superb flights of imagination. I was a fool to listen to her. She was dreaming," he repeated, as he looked at his wife; and certainly in that pale set face there was no sign of either welcome or repentance.

These thoughts were interrupted by their merry bold-faced boy, who, trotting past Sir Reginald, far ahead of his grave and stately nurse, rushed up to Alice, saying: "I've come for cake."

"Yes, yes, my darling!" replied his

mother, stooping over his dark curls. "Presently. Go over first and speak to that gentleman, and give him a kiss."

"Who is he, mother?" he asked, turning round and gazing at Sir Reginald with the facsimile of his own eyes—in fact the child's face was such a striking reproduction of his own that he himself could not help seeing the likeness. He was a splendid boy, of whom his father, were he a king, might well be proud.

Leaning his upright little person against Alice, and throwing back his head with a proud gesture very entertaining in one so young, he repeated, as he looked at Sir Reginald unflinchingly :

"Who is he?"

"He is your father," she faltered. "Go and speak to him, Maurice."

She could not refrain a glance of motherly pride as she pushed her boy with gentle

force towards his other parent. But Maurice, who had inherited all his father's deliberation and decision of character, calmly remarked :

"*He* is not my father. My father," with much pride, and hands stuck in the belt of his blouse, "is a soldier, and rides a horse with a long tail, and wears a sword and a red coat, and fights people. *You*," said he, nodding his head towards Sir Reginald, "are just like anybody else."

"Come here, sir," said his father, stretching out an arm ; and, much to everyone's amazement, the boy went quietly over and stood at his knee.

"I am a soldier ; but I have got a holiday. You don't know what that is yet, do you ? I have done with soldiers for awhile, and have put away my sword and my coat ; but I'll show them to you some day, if you like."

“Will you?” said the child with awe-struck eyes; “and will you lend me your sword to play with, for I’m going to be a soldier too some day?”

“Are you indeed? I’m afraid I can’t lend you *my* sword; but perhaps I might buy you a little one instead. Suppose you come and sit on my knee and tell me all about yourself?”

So Master Maurice, nothing loath, climbed up; and Alice, with a beating heart, saw her child in her husband’s arms for the first time. The two faces were so alike, and yet so different; she could now compare together, if she dared; but she shrank from meeting her husband’s eyes.

Maurice was completely fascinated by the strange gentleman, and regarded him with mingled curiosity and delight.

“Are you my father?” he asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"And why did you not come to see me before?"

Here was an embarrassing question.

"Because I have been in India," was the evasive reply.

"And are you come to stay at home now?" Momentary pause. Without waiting for a reply he pursued: "I've seen your picture often. Alice keeps it in a locket; that one," pointing a firm brown finger at his unfortunate mother, and raising a scorching blush to her hitherto pale face. "She says I am to love you very much—as much as her."

"Do you love her?" continued this pitiless innocent; "do you love Alice?"

Reginald, painfully embarrassed, cast about for a reply. In desperation he answered:

"Of whom are you speaking, Maurice?"

It is not possible that you call your mother Alice ! ”

“ Yes, sometimes ; and so do Aunt Mary and Miss Ferrars.”

“ Well, you are not to do it any more, remember. Now tell me your name ? ” said his father, catechising in his turn.

“ Maurice Reg—nald Fairfax.”

So he had not been wholly forgotten.

“ And how old are you ? ”

“ Past two, long time. How old are you ? ”

“ Past twenty this long time. Are you a good boy, do you think ? ”

“ Alice knows,” he replied, nodding with easy confidence towards his mother.

“ Yes, Alice knows,” said she, rising quickly and stretching out her hand ; “ Alice knows that it’s your bedtime, so say ‘ Good-night ’ and come along.”

“ No ! no ! no ! not yet ! ” he cried,

clinging tightly to Sir Reginald and burrowing under his arm.

"Maurice, listen to me," said his father gravely, setting him down. "You told me just now that you intended to be a soldier, did you not?"

"Yes," returned Maurice eagerly.

"Well, you will never do for a soldier if you go on like this; his first duty is obedience. Now give me a kiss, and go with your mother at once."

Maurice, whose *forte* was certainly not obedience, raised his eyes and looked at his father. Seeing that he was perfectly in earnest, he climbed once more on his knee, imprinted an experimental kiss on his moustache, and reluctantly departed with many regretful backward glances, Reginald watching the retreating pair till they were out of sight. Were they really his wife and son? He could scarcely realise it;

for, after all, he had had a very few months of married life and twenty-seven years of bachelor liberty. He felt much more like a bachelor than a Benedict.

Miss Saville, following his eyes, said :
“ You may well look proud of him. Is he not a splendid boy ? But he wants a father’s hand over him sadly. Alice is his slave, and has been so ever since he was born. She gives up to him in every way, and he treats her more as his playfellow—as you may see—than his mother.”

Alice, having deposited Maurice in the nursery, ran quickly down to her own room, to be alone for a little time to think and to compose herself.

She leant her hot forehead against the frame of the open window and gave way to a feeling of utter and undivided joy—joy that he was home, alive, and well, and under the very same roof as herself—at least

within earshot. She paused as she heard Mary's gay musical laugh. They were all walking about the grounds; she could see them. He was standing on the gravel path, telling them something very amusing evidently, for as he concluded Miss Saville and Miss Ferrars both laughed immoderately. With this laugh came a revulsion of feeling. “*He* could joke; he could be exceedingly entertaining. This meeting was nothing to him. He had not shown the smallest signs of emotion or agitation. He had merely come to see if she was sufficiently meek and humble to be reinstated in his good graces. No, she was *not*,” she said to herself, as she thought over the utter neglect with which he had treated her for the last three years. “He thinks he has only to extend the top of his sceptre and I shall be only too thankful to approach. But he is mistaken; I

shall be '*Vashti*' to the end of the chapter. I shall never humble myself again. Pleased as he is with Maurice now, he has never taken any direct notice of him all these years."

Alice dressed rapidly, hardening her heart with bitter recollections at every moment. Just as she had completed her toilette, and was arranging some flowers in her dress, the door opened and Mary hurried in.

"Oh you sly girl!" she exclaimed; "dressed already? I thought you were doing something of this kind to ensure a nice long *tête-à-tête* with *him*. Oh Alice!" she cried, taking her in her arms and kissing her warmly, "what a happy young woman you are! How very, very glad I am for your sake! Why did you never tell me your husband was so perfectly charming—so handsome, so distinguished—

looking? How proud you must be of him, my dear!" holding Alice at arm's length and looking at her with eager interrogation.

Alice, whose hair and costume were slightly disordered by her friend's enthusiastic hugging, drew back rather flushed and out of countenance.

"Mary," she said, averting her face as she rearranged the roses in her dress, "you are very good, and mean very kindly, but"—and she paused—"but I must tell you something I never meant to tell you. Reginald and I do not get on very well together. We—we—do not suit; but do not take any notice, *please*," she entreated as she looked at her friend appealingly. "You will soon see"—and she stopped; then continued: "Reginald is my guardian, you know; and he and I thought the best thing to do was to marry. But he is far more devoted to his

profession than to me. His sword is his real wife, and I—I—get on very well alone, as you have seen, and will see.”

“What shall I see?” asked Mary. “I see that you are the handsomest couple I have ever come across, and I have no doubt you are equally well matched in other respects.”

“Well, *qui vivra verra*,” replied Alice, as she opened the door and disappeared, anxious to avoid her friend’s inquiries. Reginald, having hurried his toilette, hastened down to the drawing-room in the hopes of seeing Alice for at least a few minutes alone. Her greeting had been cold and constrained; but she was taken by surprise. She was agitated, and his lovely shy Alice was the last to offer or accept caresses in public. It would be different when they met alone.

He stood for some time in the deep

window, looking out into the park. How still and green and cool it all looked after the bustle and heat and glare in India! "There was no place like home after all," he thought as his eyes roved over the undulating sward and the clumps of splendid timber, and he watched the rooks soaring nestwards and heard the corncrake's discordant yet familiar "Craik-craik." The door, which was ajar, was at this instant pushed open, and with a swish of long trailing skirts Alice advanced into the room. At first she seemed to hesitate, but on second thoughts approached the window.

"What a lovely evening it is, is it not?" she remarked, unfurling an enormous black fan with a grace all her own.

"Lovely indeed!" replied her husband, turning his back to the landscape and scanning her critically.

After a pause of thirty seconds (employed by his wife in steeling herself with recollections of the past), "Alice," he asked with a gesture of appeal, "have you *nothing* to say to me?"

"To say to you?" she repeated, with raised brows and an air of most perfect indifference. "No, nothing particular; unless that I am afraid you had a very warm journey here to-day. Early in the afternoon it was absolutely broiling."

"Well, yes, it *was* warm—a good deal warmer than the welcome you gave me. But you can make up for that *now*," coming closer. "Alice, are you not going to say you are glad to see me?"

"Yes, I am very glad to see you," retreating two steps and making a shield of her fan.

"And is that all?"

"I think so—what more do you expect?"

You are nothing but my guardian," she replied, avoiding his eyes.

"*Indeed!*" with an imperceptible start.

"Yes. You made the arrangement *yourself*; do not blame *me* for holding you to it," she answered hurriedly.

"That arrangement, as you call it, was made under utterly different circumstances, when you did not, and would not, believe that I was your lawful husband. It is different now—you know better than that."

"It may suit you to change *your mind*, but I do not alter mine. You are my guardian, and nothing more; as husband and wife we are strangers."

"Is this your matured determination?" said Sir Reginald in a transport of indignation.

"It is," she replied firmly. "You have forgotten the existence of your wife for

the last three years: continue to forget her. Do you think I have no pride?"

"Pride—*no!*" he exclaimed angrily. "I could not dignify it by such a name. You are consumed by a senseless besotted obstinacy, that no doubt you are pleased to consider as such."

"You are, as usual, most flattering," replied Alice, carelessly fanning herself, considerably but inwardly agitated.

"I will take you at your word," said Sir Reginald in a low but steady voice. "I shall consider your decision *final*—as husband and wife we are strangers. But I had hoped——" and he paused.

"What did you hope?" she asked sharply.

"Never mind; it is of no consequence now," preparing to withdraw from the window.

"Tell me," she asked, detaining him

with a movement of her fan, "did you ever get the photograph of Maurice that I sent you?"

"I did," he replied in an icy tone.

"You did!" she echoed. "You really did!"

"I did, as I have before remarked, and what then?" looking at her sternly.

"Only that you must have also——"

Here her answer was cut short by the entrance of Miss Saville and Mary; and Sir Reginald, walking to the other end of the room, remained aloof, looking out of the window till dinner was announced. During this short interval he had time to recover his composure and to collect his thoughts, and there was no trace of anger or agitation in his countenance as he took his seat at the foot of the dinner-table. No one could guess the enormous effort it had cost him to attain such

self-command. How strange it looked to see Alice and her husband sitting opposite each other—host and hostess—master and mistress! A man's voice was an agreeable acquisition to the three trebles, not that one of them was much heard. Sir Reginald had that clear high-bred speech which is so expressively authoritative and yet so musical; he spoke like a man who meant what he said. As to Alice, indifferent and uninterested as she looked, each syllable of those dear familiar tones thrilled her to the heart! Not once during dinner did he directly address her—he did not even look at her so far as she knew.

“He is very, very angry with me,” she mused as she made a feint of eating. “But it was better to let him know at once that I am *not* ‘the patient Griselda!’ When he cools down he will respect me all the more for respecting myself! No

doubt I was too hasty, abrupt, and perhaps aggressive. I might have softened it more—but then I never can! I have no tact!" Absorbed in her own reflections, she never observed the signals Miss Saville was making to her; her eyes were steadily fixed on her plate, and her thoughts apparently miles away.

"My dear, do you not think that we had better go into the drawing-room?"

"I beg your pardon, auntie," she exclaimed with a start. "Of course."

Sir Reginald accompanied the ladies, and spent a considerable time in looking over photographs and talking to Miss Saville, Alice having betaken herself to a distant arm-chair and Mary to the piano. After she had played for some time, she went over to Alice, and in an audible whisper said, as she stooped to arrange a tumbled chair-back:

"Come now, it is your turn; come and sing those two new songs you got last week."

"No, not to-night, Molly," she replied, shaking her head very decidedly. "Do not ask me, I could not sing a note!"

In the same way when Miss Saville challenged her to their usual game of backgammon, as at night the old lady's eyes were too weak for working or reading.

"Not to-night, please, auntie," she said plaintively, "I really feel too stupid."

"If you will accept me instead, Miss Saville, I will play with pleasure; but I am afraid you will find me a most contemptible foe," remarked Sir Reginald, as he arranged the board all wrong.

The old lady accepted his offer with the greatest alacrity, and they commenced to play without further delay.

Mary felt actually *ashamed* of Alice, who, at some distance from her relatives, lay back in her chair composedly knitting, pausing now and then to count the stitches, and then resuming her occupation as if her bread depended on it.

"Was this the way to welcome a husband? No wonder they did not 'get on' if Alice conducted herself in this fashion."

As to her husband, as far as Mary could judge, there was nothing outwardly amiss with his manners or appearance. She took the opportunity of studying him whilst he was busily puzzling his brains over the backgammon board.

About his good looks there could be but one opinion; but did not a certain curve of the nostrils speak of pride? Was not firmness almost too weak a word to convey the expression of his mouth and chin? Would not a man with less patrician beauty

and a more yielding disposition be better calculated to make a woman happy ?

As she thought all this with a contemplative gaze, she suddenly found a pair of dark eyes fixed on herself with evident interest and amusement.

“Am I so fortunate as to remind you of anyone, Miss Ferrars ?”

“No,” she replied hastily. “Please excuse my rudeness, I had no idea that I was staring so hard ; but you must remember that you are actually the first Victoria Cross I have ever seen ; and pardon me.”

“Surely you did not expect to see anything unusual in my appearance on that account ?” he asked with a smile. “I daresay you have seen many as deserving of the distinction, if not more so. It is all a matter of luck.”

“Is that the way you speak of your

honours?" said Miss Saville, pouncing down remorselessly on a blot. "I have no doubt you are very proud of the cross all the same, and that you earned it *well*," she added with conviction.

A bald desultory conversation was kept up and solely supported between Miss Saville and her nephew. Even Mary, from her opulent resources, could find but little to say, for Alice's demeanour paralysed all efforts at sociability. Alice, leaning back in her chair with an air of serene divine beatitude, enacted the part of a blanket of the heaviest and wettest description.

A very dreary evening at last came to an end, and when the ladies had departed Reginald strolled out into the pleasure-grounds to have a smoke and a think.

As he paced moodily up and down, his reflections were anything but agreeable—very much the reverse.

“What an infernal idiot I was to have come here! Fairfax, thy name is *fool*,” he added with bitter emphasis. “Far from being inclined for *peace*, Alice does all she can to *pose* as the injured wife. There is nothing like taking high ground,” he muttered to himself, contemptuously kicking a fir-cone out of his way. “When the Mayhews come I’ll go, and meanwhile I’ll meet Alice on her own terms. I shall take her at her word once for all. No more halting between two opinions; no womanish caprice; we shall be strangers. I am actually talking to myself,” he exclaimed with a shrug of his shoulders; “an infallible sign that my reason is beginning to totter. Well, if the worst comes to the worst, I shan’t be the first Fairfax that has been an out-and-out *fool*.”

CHAPTER VIII.

ALICE'S OVERTURES ARE DECLINED.

BEING an early riser, Sir Reginald took a walk with his son and improved their acquaintance before breakfast the following morning. They found their way to the stables by mutual consent. Sir Reginald was astounded at their empty condition.

“Where are the carriage-horses?—where are the brown cobs?” he asked authoritatively.

“Please, sir, Lady Fairfax sent them back to Looton more than two years ago,

as she never used them. She never drives," said the groom gloomily.

"Then what are these two hunters doing here?"

"Her ladyship rides 'em reg'lar!"

"Rides them! Do you mean to say that she rides that chestnut, 'Cardigan'—the most ungovernable brute I ever owned? There must have been some great mistake in their coming here at all. These are not the horses I ordered to be sent down."

"I allus thought so, Sir Reginald; but her ladyship would not hear of any change, and I must say she do manage that mad cracked beast uncommon. But he is no ways fit for a lady, nor indeed for a gentleman."

"Well, see that you never saddle him for her again. Those are my orders," he said, turning away. "She must

have thought that I wanted to break her neck. Ignorance has certainly been bliss in my case. Many a wretched hour I would have spent had I known that Alice had adopted Cardigan as her park hack," he muttered to himself as he walked towards the house in answer to the gong which summoned him to breakfast.

The same afternoon the Mayhews and Geoffrey arrived. After five-o'clock tea under the cedar, and a turn round the garden with Reginald, Helen was escorted to her room by her hostess.

"Shut the door and come here, Alice; I want to speak to you," she said imperatively.

Alice, knowing from the tone of her voice that a lecture was coming, took a seat in the deep window-sill, and clasping her hands round her knees, looked up at her mentor with grave expectant eyes.

"There is *no* use in your looking at me with the air of a Christian martyr, you tiresome girl. What is this amazing piece of folly that I hear from Reginald?"

"I am sure I don't know," replied Alice innocently.

"He tells me that you received him as an utter stranger!"

"Of course I did."

"I assure you, Alice, most solemnly," said her friend, brandishing her hairbrush to give emphasis to her words, "that his patience is well-nigh exhausted, and you have bitterly, sorely disappointed him. Your power over him is rapidly waning, and no wonder. He told me in plain English that he would trouble himself no longer about you. He came home softened towards you by illness, time, and absence, and, little as you deserved it, laid his laurels

at your feet. From all accounts you flung them in his face ! What a foolish reckless girl you are ! Your happiness comes to you, and you spurn it. 'Too late, too late !' will be the answer when you yourself go to seek it ere long."

"But listen to me for one second, Helen," interrupted Alice, vainly endeavouring to stem the torrent of her friend's eloquence. "Hear me for an instant. I never expected him to come here ; he took me utterly by surprise. Would you have had me volunteer an embrace—after our chilly parting, after three years' absolute silence ? I *did* humble myself to the very dust before him, and all in vain."

"When ? How ? You are talking nonsense !" exclaimed Helen excitedly. "Nonsense I fail to understand."

"Promise me, my dear Helen, that you

will *never* breathe it to mortal, not even to Mark," she whispered.

"Yes, yes, I promise," returned her cousin with almost tragic solemnity.

"It was before Maurice was born. He never took any notice. I blush when I think of it," she continued, burying her face in her hands. "I sent him Maurice's photo too," she murmured.

"Well!" with a gasp of amazement, "I cannot understand it. But you must remember that you treated him horribly. Do not despair of his forgiveness yet. I am sure that in your heart you love him dearly. Make one effort to win him back for yourself. I know how hard it is to conquer one's pride, but surely the happiness of your whole life is worth a little humility, just as much as the throne of France was worth a mass." Laying her hands on Alice's shoulders, and looking

down at her gravely, she said: "If Reginald leaves this to-morrow evening in his present state of mind, you will never see him again as long as you live! that is my firm belief."

"Oh Helen! do you really mean it?" she faltered.

"Yes, of course I do. He will go out into the world and mix in society, where he will be made much of; petted by women, for whom a hero *has* attractions. Basking in the world's smiles, rich, handsome, and successful, he will soon forget the proud, heartless, obstinate girl he once called wife. All sympathy will be for him. For you, living here in remote seclusion, eating your heart out with unavailing regrets, what will you do? You will not even have the comfort of your own compassion; all you can say will be, 'It serves me right!' And as year by year snatches a portion

of your youth and beauty from you, you will settle down into a miserable, dejected, hopeless woman."

"My goodness, Helen, what a horoscope ! what a picture !"

"Then, Alice, unless you would see it a reality, be up and doing ; rouse yourself, endeavour to be the gay light-hearted Alice of former days. Instead of cold looks and short answers, try once more smiles and jests, assume a virtue if you have it not ; get out some of your former perfect wardrobe and make yourself as lovely as you can, and I promise you you will find yourself much happier ere long. You *will* make an effort to make friends, will you not, my dear girl ?" said Helen, smoothing Alice's shining hair and kissing her on the forehead. "As a wife, it is your *duty* to be submissive."

"It is a very painful, difficult duty,"

said Alice, laying her face against Helen's arm.

"Do you wish to lose him altogether, Alice?" exclaimed Helen impatiently.

"No, no, I could not, I will not," she whispered without raising her head. During the last few moments Alice's love and pride had struggled in mortal conflict, and pride had been slain. After a silence of nearly five minutes, she raised her head and stood up, and turning her tear-stained colourless face to her cousin said :

"What shall I do if Reginald repulses me, as he most probably will, since you say he is so angry?"

"Never mind ; after all he is your husband, in spite of the folly you both talk about ward and guardian. He is as much your husband as Mark is mine, and you need not be bashful in making stray little advances to him. It is not as if you were a stranger."

"It will be just as bad as if he were. I told him we were to be strangers for the future."

"You told him *that*!" exclaimed Helen with a gesture of incredulity. "I never heard of such madness—never! Impress upon him without delay that you have exercised your sex's privilege and changed your mind. Run away now and get ready for dinner; the first bell was rung ten minutes ago. And let me see that you will be a good sensible girl for once, and, what is more important still, a good wife. Remember that we have always to give in."

"If you only had any idea of the task you have set me, and how small and miserable I feel," replied Alice, with her hand on the door-handle.

"Come, be off. Don't talk nonsense. You have no time to lose. Don't let me

see that face at dinner—you look as if Melancholy had marked you for her own. Away with you,” cried Mrs. Mayhew, playfully pushing her out of the room.

Parker was amazed to hear her lady say :

“Get me out my white silk and gauze dinner-dress, please, as quickly as possible, and run down to the pleasure-grounds, and bring me a bunch of crimson roses.”

Twenty minutes later Alice appeared in the drawing-room, where she was the cynosure of all eyes except her husband's ; he merely swept her face with one cold glance, and resumed his conversation with Geoffrey.

She wore a long and exquisitely-made square-cut white silk, with a bunch of red roses in her bosom. A piece of black velvet was fastened at her throat by a diamond

star, with solitaires in her ears to correspond. Dinner went off much more cheerfully than on the previous day. Alice and Geoffrey seemed to have forgotten their feud and fallen into their old ways; their gay repartees and small jokes provoked general amusement. Alice caught her husband's eyes fixed on her more than once in grave, puzzled amazement.

In the drawing-room, Alice went unasked to the piano and sang two songs, "Rest on your battle-fields, ye brave," and "The Rhine Maiden." She sang the former with such intense pathos and feeling that Mrs. Mayhew and Mary were on the very verge of tears. Her pure, deliciously sympathetic voice called forth pleasure on every face except the one on which she wished to see it reflected.

Her husband continued his occupation of pulling Tory's ears as unconcernedly as if

there was not a note of music within ten miles. After a time a round game was proposed.

“Come along, Alice,” said Geoffrey, “and help me to count the markers,” emptying, as he spoke, a basketful of mother-o’-pearl fish on the crimson cloth. As she stood beside the table in the full light of the lamp, busily reckoning dozens of counters, her husband realised how lovely she was—lovelier than ever, as Helen had said. What could surpass the exquisite symmetry of her slender figure, her delicately-chiselled profile, or the graceful poise of her haughty little head? What her face had lost in its perpetual ripple of smiles it had more than gained in expression. She had grown, too, he discovered, at least an inch; her head was far above Geoffrey’s shoulder. How young and girlish she looked, not more than nineteen at the outside! *Who* would

believe that she was the mother of that great boy upstairs? It seemed absurd. How well he knew her half-foreign tricks and gesticulations with her pretty taper hands, as she indignantly accused Geoffrey of purloining a dozen counters more than his share. Would anyone think, as they looked at her standing there, that she was utterly without heart, as cold and callous as a block of marble, a miracle of obstinacy, and unreasonable beyond belief?

Presently she approached him, outwardly with graceful composure, inwardly with much trepidation, and said, without raising her eyes above his enamel solitaire shirt-stud:

“You will play, will you not, Reginald?”

“Thanks, no,” he replied, leaning still farther back in his chair and languidly drawing Tory towards him by both ears.

“Oh do,” she persisted, nervously twist-

ing her bangles round and round her wrist; "we are so few, and Geoffrey says you can teach us a new game."

"No, thank you, Alice, I feel too stupid this evening."

This speech was evidently said with intention, and a look that baffled and chilled her accompanied the shaft as it went home.

"Nonsense, my good fellow!" exclaimed Geoffrey from the card-table, "of course you'll play. I never heard of such laziness. You will have to come to make up the number."

Thus adjured, he was obliged to join the circle, where he ostentatiously selected the farthest seat from Alice. All the same he sat opposite her, and was forced during the game to address her frequently; but his tone was coolly formal, and frozen indifference was in his glance.

Nevertheless, it was as much as he could do to keep his head cool, with those lovely wistful eyes opposite him. "What, in Heaven's name, does she mean?" he muttered to himself over his cards, as more than once she made some remark and smiled at him across the table.

"*Souvent femme varie, folle qui se fie.* She has perhaps changed her mind in spite of her assurance to me yesterday. I shall not change *mine*, come what may."

His answers to her questions were curtly polite, and he appeared totally absorbed in the game, and nothing but the game, and the enormous heap of counters that were piled before him.

"Just look at Reginald," said Geoffrey, pointing enviously at his riches; "did you ever see such luck? What's that saying about love and play? Something beginning, '*Malheureux en jeu*——'"

"Never mind French quotations," interrupted Helen precipitately, and frowning and signing at Geoffrey, "but pay me the six counters you owe me."

"What are you nodding your head and frowning for?" inquired this exasperating youth. "I've not said anything, have I?" looking round with an air of injured innocence.

"I'm bankrupt!" exclaimed Alice, suddenly folding her hands on the table and looking with a mock-melancholy face at Mark.

A reckless gambler, she had just seen her last counter swept away, and was utterly penniless. Loans were freely offered by Helen and Geoffrey.

Helen was only too glad to divert the conversation, but much to their astonishment she declined their assistance, saying, as she held a pink palm across the table:

"Reginald is the richest of you all ; he has made a fortune, and he is the proper person to pay my gambling debts."

With a look of unqualified amazement he divided his heap of counters into two portions, and without a single remark pushed one of them towards Alice. In doing so she observed for the first time a deep scar across his wrist.

"What is that dreadful cut, Reginald?" she asked timidly.

"Nothing," he replied shortly, pulling down his shirt-cuff and rapidly dealing out the cards.

"One of his many honourable scars," explained Geoffrey. "It's an uncommonly deep sabre cut he got that time he took the standard, and only——"

"Never mind standards and scratches, but go on with the game," interrupted

Reginald with a tinge of asperity in his tone ; "it's you to lead, Geoffrey."

"I say, Rex," returned Geoffrey, as if struck by a happy thought as he leisurely sorted his hand, "wouldn't it be fun if you were to give a lecture, a *public* lecture, on the Afghan war, say in the Assembly Room at Manister? It would fill like mad, and you might send the proceeds——"

"To an asylum for idiots," interrupted Sir Reginald impatiently. "Will you play or not, Geoffrey?"

"I'll play, of course!" returned that youth tranquilly, "but why should we not temper cards with conversation? Here"—nodding towards Alice—"I play the Queen of Hearts!"

After breakfast the next morning, the ladies of the party sauntered about the garden and grounds. An easy-chair, a

cigar, and *The Times* supplied the Honorable Mark's requirements. Sir Reginald, declining Geoffrey's challenge to a game of tennis, repaired to the library to write letters.

Alice having done the honours of the garden and shown Helen the most reliable fruit trees, ran back to the house for a basket, in order to gather some plums for dessert. In returning, she nearly came into collision with her husband at the garden-gate. Very much to her surprise he accosted her, saying:

"Alice, the carriage-horses and cobs will be here this evening. I beg that you will not send them away again."

"But they are of no use to me, really. Auntie has her ponies, and I never drive."

"But for the use of your visitors, and returning calls, a carriage is indispensable."

"I never have any visitors, nor have I any calls to return."

"Pray why not?"

"No one has called on me. Is not that an excellent excuse?"

"Am I to understand that you have no acquaintances?"

"With the exception of the clergyman's family and the Ruffords, who live at the other end of the county, and the Grantleys, who are abroad—I may say, none."

"Is this by your own wish?"

"Well, no; not that I care two straws for society, but I will not conceal from you"—with a faint smile and drawing a pattern on the gravel with her pretty little shoe—"that I am *not* a social success."

"Do you mean me to understand that you are what is called 'not visited'?"

"If you look at it in that light, I

suppose I am *not*," she replied, glancing towards the garden-gate, and moving a few steps in its direction.

"Will you permit me to inquire the reason?" he asked, following her and interposing himself between her and the garden.

"I would rather not tell you," she answered in a low voice, picking off the blossoms of syringa that embowered the gate, and putting them into her basket.

"But you will have to tell me," he exclaimed, leaning his back against the gate and setting his straw hat with its zingari ribbon still farther over his eyes.

"I cannot," she faltered, blushing furiously. "There is no good in telling you; it will only make you—I mean," correcting herself, "it may annoy you."

"Annoy me!" he echoed; "I am quite accustomed to that. Pray don't study me

in the matter ; I am used to being *annoyed*, as you call it. Come, do not trifle with me any longer—tell me at once why you are not visited in the neighbourhood.”

“I told you before I could not,” looking down the gravel path that lay between them and the house, and evidently preparing for an abrupt departure.

“You shall not go !” he exclaimed, seizing her by the wrist, as if he had divined her intention. “Neither shall you pass through this gate till you answer my question,” putting his shoulder against it and looking the very picture of resolution.

“Why do you tease me like this, Reginald ? Do not detain me. Please do not ask me to answer your question,” she urged, endeavouring to withdraw her hand.

“You must, and you *shall* tell me,” he said angrily, involuntarily squeezing her

wrist still tighter. "Neither you nor I shall stir until I know. As your guardian it is my duty to inquire into the reason that you are excluded from society."

"Only as my guardian—not as my husband?" she asked in a low voice.

"Certainly—only as your guardian. You gave your husband a lesson lately that he is not likely to forget. Never allude to him again, if you please."

"But I did not mean—at least I am sorry—I was hasty," she stammered.

"Your sorrow comes too late—your sincerity is doubtful. Pray excuse my rudeness, but remember that it is to your guardian *only* you are speaking," letting go her hand at last.

"Then, as my guardian, I don't mind telling you," turning away her face, and becoming perfectly scarlet as far as the ear and cheek that were visible were concerned.

"They think—they say——"

"Go on," he urged inexorably.

"That I am a *divorcée*. There!" she cried, facing him, "the murder is out!"

"What!" he exclaimed in a voice that, although not loud, made her start. "You dare," he said slowly, "to repeat such a tale to me?"

"I had no choice; you *would* hear it. There is no use in being angry with *me*; it is not my fault. You know very well that I do not deserve such a stigma—that every thought in my heart belongs to Maurice, and," she added almost under her breath—"you."

His sharp ears caught the last word.

"That is putting it strongly indeed. Nothing could be more forcible," he replied with a sneer. "So they say you are a *divorcée*?" he continued, his passion repressed but at a white heat all the same,

looking her over from head to foot. "Where are the grounds for this most infernal scandal that ever was hatched by evil-tongued old women? What is the story?" he asked vehemently.

"I do not know," replied Alice, now perfectly composed. "Of course I would be the *last* to hear."

"It does not appear to concern you much," he exclaimed angrily.

"No, not *much*," she replied, looking at him with her clear, frank, truthful eyes.

"By Jove, then it concerns *me*! Society about here wants a lesson in good manners and hospitality if in nothing else. If I can find out the originator of this outrageous calumny it will be worse for him. I believe, if he was here now, I would—— But never mind, what is the good of blustering about it to you? I shall *act*, that is more to the purpose. How can you be thought a

divorcée when you were never divorced? The story is senseless ; you imagine it, perhaps."

"It is not imagination that no one ever calls here, is it?" she asked dryly. "I believe it is thought that you sent me to Monkswood to hush up scandal and to save the Fairfax name, and that I am really as bad as ever I can be."

"As bad as ever you can be!" he repeated, with remarkable fluctuations of countenance, and half under his breath. "As bad as ever you can be!" he repeated, his eyes alight with a sombre fire.

"I do not see that you need be so *very* angry, Reginald. Remember that it is my *guardian*," emphasizing the word ; "it does not concern you so much."

"It does concern me. Nothing could concern me more," he answered vehemently.

"If I had known you would have been

so fearfully angry I never would have told you. How unreasonable and inconsistent you are. You insisted on an answer; you made me speak by main force"—holding up her slender wrist, which still retained the red mark of his fingers—"and when your wish is gratified you are furious. You are encroaching on the privileges of my sex; now are you not?" she asked with a smile.

"Did *I* do that, Alice?" he exclaimed aghast, pointing to her wrist. "I most sincerely beg your pardon. I was so determined to hear the truth that I forgot it was not a man's arm I was grasping. I have been downright brutal, but the idea of anyone casting a slur on *you* of all people drives me beside myself. I am afraid I have been very rude and violent altogether; but you are acquainted with my temper of old, and time, as you may

observe, has not improved it," he concluded with a short laugh.

"May I look at your wrist?" he asked with real concern depicted in his face.

"You may," she replied, frankly placing her thin little hand in his.

"I hope you will forgive me, Alice. I must have hurt you," he added after a pause, dropping her hand with a respectful distant gesture, as if he had suddenly recollected himself.

"You did hurt me. You have no idea how strong you are; your hand feels as if it were made of steel. 'I'll forgive you *this* time,' as Madame Daverne used to say, 'but don't let it occur again,'" she added with an assumed gaiety she was far from feeling.

After a silence of some minutes he said:

"I can promise you one thing, Alice, and that is, that you shall resume your proper

position in society, and be treated with the respect to which you have every claim. Your good name and mine are one. We will not talk any more on the subject, and I need not detain you longer," opening the garden-gate politely and standing aside to allow her to pass. But Alice was apparently in no hurry; she continued pulling the syringa mechanically.

"I want you to promise me something else, Reginald. Will you be friends with me," she asked, raising her sweet wet eyes to his.

"Friends!" he echoed, fairly staggered by the question. "Friends!" he reiterated in a slow deliberate tone, "of course. As your guardian, I must be your friend; and I am," he replied stiffly.

"That is not the sort of friend I mean. A guardian seems to me to be a sort of stern surly old gentleman, who doles out money, and orders one about, and keeps

one in order, and is altogether horribly disagreeable."

"Charming picture! May I ask if I am the original?" he inquired.

"No, of course not; you may be stern and disagreeable, but you are not old and surly."

"You are really *too* flattering!"

"If you knew how few friends I have, how alone in the world I feel, you would not say *no*," she urged.

"Did I say no?" he inquired with raised brows.

"You certainly have not met my advances halfway," she replied with a forced laugh. "You *will* be my friend, will you not, Regy?" she pleaded, laying her hand timidly on his coat-sleeve.

"I thought we were to be strangers?" he returned, coolly and politely removing her fingers.

With a gesture of impatience Alice turned away, struggling hard to repress her tears, and with a fair assumption of dignity endeavoured to open the gate which a moment before had closed itself with a bang. She could hardly see as she bungled at the bolt.

“Allow me!” said her husband, starting forward to her assistance. To her unutterable dismay and disgust, one of her too ready tears fell with a splash on his slim brown hand. It had the effect of melting him at once. He gazed at Alice steadfastly, and with a softer look in his dark eyes than they had known for many a day.

“You foolish girl! if you really think my friendship worth having—do you not know very well that it is yours, and that, in spite of everything, I am always your best friend? How can I be otherwise?”

Much and often as I have wished it, I am not one of those who can forget."

"Nor are you one of those who can forgive!"

"How can you tell?"

"How can you ask me such a question?"

"Well, we won't argue about it. You say you want a friend?"

"I often want a friend to advise me—someone older, wiser, and better than I am."

"I can hardly flatter myself that you allude to me," he said, surveying his wife with the gravest astonishment.

"Yes, of course I do."

"To obtain your good opinion has always been my ambition; but I had no idea that I held such a high place in your esteem. You have quite taken my breath away."

"I wish you would not talk in this

horribly satirical manner; it is not at all nice of you, Reginald—not a bit like what you used to be! What has changed you?”

“I am not the least like what I used to be; in many respects I was a fool,” he replied with perfect equanimity.

“Were you, really?” she said, stopping and looking at him with wide-open eyes. “What makes you say so? You are joking.”

“All right! let us imagine that I am joking. You say you want a friend ready with counsel and advice. What more can you desire than Helen?” waving his hand towards the garden. “If you are fond of taking advice—of which ‘I hae me doots,’ as the Scotchman said—there is no one who loves imparting it better. It will be a mutual satisfaction for both parties.”

“Now you are down on Helen’s little

weakness; that's rather a shame, you know. Of course I have Helen for a friend and adviser, but——"

"Excuse me for interrupting you, but may I light a cigar? It has the same effect on me that music is popularly supposed to have on the savage."

"Go on, Alice," he said, when he had lit up to his satisfaction; "you were telling me something very interesting just now about a friend. Why will not Helen meet all the requirements of the case?" he asked, with a mocking expression in his eyes.

"Do be serious."

"Very well, I will," he answered with sudden gravity. "You say you want an intimate, confidential, particular friend, and have done me the honour to offer me the post."

She nodded.

“I beg to decline it in the most unqualified manner. I am your friend in the best sense of the word—I would cut off my right arm to serve you—but a friend at a distance, one that you will seldom hear of, much less see. The friendship of which you have visions is out of the question between us, and only possible between husband and wife. Be satisfied with your own arrangements; we are ward and guardian, nothing more. Do not be vexed with me for speaking plainly; you asked me to be serious, and I am serious. It seems to me that you do not know your own mind two consecutive hours, but I am not so changeable. You had everything in your hands the other day; it was a question of now or never. Two words would have bridged the gulf between us; you did not speak those two words, and now

the occasion for them will never occur again—you let slip your last opportunity.”

“I do not in the least understand you,” she faltered.

“If you reflect for a moment, I think you will remember the two words—the key to the riddle.—Here comes Geoffrey,” he observed, as Geoffrey, in a cool gray suit, with a flower in his button-hole, came bounding towards them.

“Well, upon my word,” he exclaimed, “I’ve been watching you two for the last twenty minutes, talking away nineteen to the dozen, and had I not previously known I should have declared it one of the most promising flirtations I ever interrupted.”

“You are always thinking of flirtations,” said Alice, hastily turning away. “Come along, and help me to gather some plums; Helen is waiting for the basket.”

CHAPTER IX.

“SIR REGINALD’S EYES ARE OPENED.”

“ALICE, I have such a crow to pick with you!” exclaimed Mrs. Mayhew, bursting into her room the same afternoon, as she was dressing for lawn-tennis.

“With me?” pausing with one arm in the sleeve of her dress. “Pick away, I daresay I shall find a bag to put the feathers in.”

“It is no joking matter, I assure you,” said Helen, leaning one hand on the dressing-table and nodding her head with much solemnity. “Reginald has been so

angry with me, I declare I feel just as I used to do after I had had a lecture from papa. I never saw him in such a rage in my life, and all about you," she concluded indignantly.

"*Cela va sans dire*," replied Alice, coolly selecting a handkerchief from her satchet.

"What is this monstrous tale you have been telling him about not being visited, and being tabooed as a *divorcée*? I never heard of anything so utterly absurd. I told him that it was entirely a delusion; that living so much alone had made you fancy and imagine things; and that I was certain it was all a mistake—mere imagination."

"You should not have said that, Helen," replied Alice gravely. "Is it imagination that, although I have lived here for three years, not one in the neighbourhood has crossed the threshold with the exception of the rector and the Ruffords? Am I

taxing my imagination very heavily when I say that I am never asked to join in any of the local charities, bazaars, or concerts, although belonging to one of the oldest families in the county, and known to be abundantly blessed with riches? Am I drawing on my imagination when I tell you that the looks which I meet are too disdainful to describe?—that were I that dreadful woman I heard you telling auntie about, who had run away from her husband and children—gone off with an actor I think you said—they could not hold me in greater scorn and contempt?”

“And why has this never come to my ears? Why have you kept it from me all along? Reginald has been telling me that he left you under my charge and Mark’s, and a pretty way I have fulfilled my trust, he says, when he comes home, only to find you outlawed from society.

Why was I not told? Was this fair to me, Alice?" said Mrs. Mayhew, sinking into a seat with an air of being entirely overwhelmed.

"We kept it from you on purpose, auntie and I; we thought there was no use in worrying you and Mark, and all you could have said or done would not have been of the slightest use. All the waters in the sea would not have washed me white in the estimation of my charitable neighbours. When first I came here I was too miserable to notice anything; then for a long time I was very ill, as you know. It was fully a year before I became really alive to my position, as you would call it. Then auntie spoke to the rector, and he told her the truth—that it was said that Reginald had separated from me for very good reasons; and he asked her point-blank if we were on friendly terms. What could she

say?"—with a gesture of appeal—"she told him the truth—that we were not, but that our difference was entirely a matter between ourselves, and did not concern the world at large. But, unfortunately for us, the world at large is deeply interested in our affairs. The rector believed auntie, I am sure, but no one else will listen to such an explanation for one second; and as it transpired through the servants and the post-office that I never received any Indian letters, but lots of English ones in a man's hand—Geoffrey's—my fate was sealed. I am considered a dreadful young person. Tell me, Helen," putting on a most bewitching little hat, and looking at her mischievously with her head on one side, "do I *look* very improper?"

"Alice, how can you go on like this?" exclaimed her cousin hysterically. "How can you jest on such a subject? What an .

odd extraordinary girl you are; at one moment in the wildest spirits, at another in the depths of woe."

"You cannot accuse me of very wild spirits lately, at any rate, and you must not forget that I have Irish blood in my veins, and excuse my vagaries on that score. I can tell you that I surprise *myself* very much at times."

"Alice! Alice!" shouted Geoffrey from downstairs.

"There, I must be off. Do not look so dismal, my dear horrified Helen. Now that Reginald has come here, people will think better of me, you will see. Come along," she continued, taking her arm and hurrying her down the corridor, and flying with her downstairs at a breakneck pace, "they are all waiting for us on the tennis-ground; even Mark is going to play."

"If you had not been so perverse,

shutting yourself up, refusing to come to us in London, and living the life of a nun, these dreadful ideas would never have occurred to people," panted Mrs. Mayhew breathlessly. "It was your own fault entirely, your *own* fault," she concluded emphatically, as they came within earshot of Geoffrey, who was waiting for them at the edge of the lawn.

The Monkswood people played tennis all the afternoon with great zeal and spirit: Alice and Mary, Reginald and Geoffrey, all clad in orthodox white flannel apparel, had had some capital games; Mr. and Mrs. Mayhew, less young and active, having settled down after the first half hour into the *rôle* of spectators, under the shade of a wide-spreading horse-chestnut, where claret-cup and tea awaited the thirsty. At length, breathless and hot, Reginald and Geoffrey, who had been playing a match, came over,

and, throwing themselves at full length on the grass, said: "For goodness' sake, give us something to drink! Send round the claret-cup!"

"So you were beaten, Geoffrey? *Poor* Geoffrey," observed Alice compassionately, as she handed him a bumper of claret and soda-water.

"I haven't half a fair chance with him," he replied with a deprecating nod towards his victor; "he has a tremendous pull over me—he is such an A 1 racket-player; spent hours in the racket-court every day in India."

"No, no, merely to keep myself from going to sleep of an afternoon. I'm only a very moderate player, indeed," expostulated Reginald modestly.

"Perhaps you will say that you are a very moderate cricketer too?" said Geoffrey, with an air of calm judicial severity.

"Nothing to boast about, certainly."

"Well, I'll do the boasting for you; and that reminds me that I met the curate in the village this morning."

"No very novel or startling sight. *Après?*"

"He is coming up here this afternoon to ask you to play in the local cricket-match on Monday, also to wait on you and pay you the visit of ceremony."

Reginald, who had been reposing at full length, gazing up speculatively among the wide broad-leaved branches, now turned suddenly on his elbow and brought himself *vis-à-vis* to Geoffrey with a stare of profound incredulity in his handsome dark eyes.

"The Phoenix Club against the world! The curate is a cricket-maniac of the first water. He has let me in for it—I'm a Phoenix," concluded Geoffrey in an aggrieved

tone. "I only trust we shall have an appreciative audience next Monday."

"I hope you impressed upon the curate that there was not the smallest probability of my taking part in the match," said Reginald imperiously.

"*Au contraire*; on the principle of the fox who has lost his tail, I informed him that you were well known at Lord's and elsewhere as one of the best bowlers in the Service, and that he had only to enlist you among the eleven to ensure a signal victory; consequently he will take *no* refusal."

"But I do not intend to play," remarked Reginald firmly. "You forget that I have a stiff arm. My cricketing days are over; for the future, as far as the noble game is concerned, I intend to live on my reputation."

"Your arm is as well as ever," returned

Geoffrey with calm conviction ; “ I would be very sorry to stand a buffet from it. *That* excuse shan’t serve you—and, by the same token, here’s the holy man coming up the avenue in a carriage and pair.”

“ Nonsense, Geoffrey ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Mayhew, looking over her shoulder. “ Alice ”—in a tragic tone, and with a significant glance—“ here are visitors.”

“ So I see,” replied Alice with wonderful nonchalance. “ I suppose I must go in, though, literally speaking, I am *out*. Who will go with me ? ” looking round. “ Don’t all speak at once.”

“ Not I, for one,” returned Mary promptly ; “ if I accompanied you with this red face ”—fanning herself with a small branch of horse-chestnut leaves — “ the people would think you had been beating me. Besides, I see too much of that old lady in her yellow bonnet as it is ; she sits

just in front of us in church. I believe she is the greatest gossip in the county, so be sure you don't commit yourself beyond the weather, and the beauty and amiability of a certain Miss Ferrars who is staying with you."

"I'll go with you, my pretty Alice," said Geoffrey, still, however, retaining his recumbent position, and making believe to play the guitar upon his tennis-bat, and fingering away with great fluency and skill.

"‘Nobody asked you, sir, she said,’" quoted Alice, standing up and shaking some crumbs from her lap. "Your manners are not sufficiently formed—you don't know the meaning of the word ‘decorum,’ and you always try to make me laugh or inveigle me into some horrid blunder, and then you are delighted and sit grinning like a Cheshire cat. No, *you* won't do."

"Thanks, fair cousin, thanks," raising himself to a kneeling posture, and making a profound full-length salaam on the short green sward.

"I see I must go alone," exclaimed Alice, glancing hopelessly at her husband, who was lying on the grass, smoking, his arms folded behind his head, his hat over his eyes, the very embodiment of luxurious lazy indifference.

"Don't drink *all* the tea, good people," was her parting injunction as she hurried off across the lawn, the whole party following with admiring eyes her well-poised figure and graceful gait.

"I must go in too," said Helen with visible reluctance, when she had conscientiously drained her second cup of tea. "I promised to drive down to the village with Miss Saville. She thinks one of the school-master's daughters would be an ideal maid

for Hilda. Heigho! I suppose I must leave you," rising heavily.

"It is to be hoped that this 'ideal maid' will turn out to be something more beautiful than your present treasure, Helen," remarked Geoffrey impressively. "To say that she is plain about the head but feebly expresses it; if you were to set her up in a field, not a crow would come near it. Shall I come with you"—half rising—"and give you the benefit of my critical and artistic eye? I'm not half a bad judge," he added complacently.

"How can you be so detestably vulgar! Fancy discussing the appearance of people's servants," said Helen, with the air of lofty righteous indignation.

"And why not?" pursued Geoffrey serenely.

"Why not?" echoed Mrs. Mayhew.
"Well, for one thing—— However, I'm

not going to bandy words with you now—here are all these people coming from the house, and I must flee,” she added hastily, as she turned and hurried off among the trees in the hopes of making her escape unseen.

She was quite correct—Alice was actually sallying forth, escorting two elderly ladies and a vapid-looking youth, with hay-coloured hair and an incipient ditto moustache. He wore an extraordinarily high collar, an eye-glass, and pale lavender gloves, and it was easy to see that he considered James Blundell, Esq., the very glass of fashion and the mould of form. He was sucking the knob of his cane with greedy relish, and casting every now and then glances of marked approbation on his pretty young hostess, as he stalked along beside her.

“What in the world possessed Alice to

bring them out here?" growled Mr. Mayhew irritably, as he looked over his shoulder and beheld the advancing squadron.

"To allow us to share the pleasure of entertaining them, of course," responded Miss Ferrars in her most affable manner.

"Does the old lady with the parrot beak call that thing on her head a bonnet, or a bewitched bird's-nest?" whispered Geoffrey, as she slowly and majestically approached the group under the trees—in fact, her mode of progression gave one the idea that she was on castors, and being pushed along over the turf like a heavy piece of furniture.

Alice introduced Mrs. Pritchard and Mrs. Blundell to Miss Ferrars.

"My cousins, Mr. Mayhew and Mr. Saville," she said, indicating the two reclining gentlemen, who sprang up, bowed themselves, and again subsided. Mrs. Blundell and Mrs. Pritchard having executed leisurely

and patronising bows all round, sank into two roomy garden-chairs, and permitted themselves to be refreshed with cups of tea.

Sir Reginald, who had been collecting stray bats and balls, now joined the group, and doffing his hat politely to the new arrivals, made some trivial remark with respect to that fail-me-never topic, the weather. He seemed to take it for granted that they would recognise him as their host, and dispensed tea, claret-cup, and strawberries to the best of his ability.

Geoffrey still remained prone on the grass, making no attempt to share his labours, and apparently spell-bound by Mrs. Blundell's appearance.

But Reginald's efforts at hospitality were not favourably received by the two lady guests: their gaze was that of stony interrogation, their answers brevity itself.

"*Who*," they asked themselves, "was this handsome young fellow in the cricketing flannels and straw hat with a zingari ribbon, so suspiciously at his ease—so entirely at home? Had their ears deceived them, or had he called Lady Fairfax by her christian-name?"

"No sugar, Alice—no sugar," in an easy authoritative tone, that spoke whole volumes of the closest intimacy.

No tea for young Mr. Blundell—no, no, his most ardent desire was to have a game of tennis with Lady Fairfax—a desire by no means warmly reciprocated. Nevertheless, she good-naturedly left the cool shade once more in order to gratify his wishes.

Meanwhile, the two ladies engaged the rest of the party in desultory languid conversation.

Mrs. Blundell was a very stout pompous

old woman, whose skin somehow had the appearance of being too tight for her face. A pair of rolling little pig's eyes took in every object with microscopic detail; in fact, they had a double duty to perform, as their owner was exceedingly deaf, and in every case brought the eye to the rescue of the ear. She not only had to be roared at, but roared herself in reply; and what she flattered herself was an inaudible whisper was generally as loud as ordinary conversation, and as she indulged her friend and toady, Mrs. Pritchard, with many of these supposed *sotto voce* remarks, the result can be better imagined than described. A most gorgeous yellow bonnet adorned Mrs. Blundell's hoary head. To an inexperienced eye it appeared a mad rendezvous of flowers, beads, and feathers. A very voluminous satin mantle enshrouded her matronly form—a mantle that would

have been a mine of wealth to an Indian squaw being a prey to the all-pervading bead, and one mass of steel fringes, tassels, and trimmings. So much for her outward woman.

Mrs. Blundell had a threefold object in visiting Monkswood; she came, firstly, to gratify her son, who had been immensely smitten with Lady Fairfax's appearance, and who yearned to make her personal acquaintance; secondly, she came to indulge herself in the proud consciousness that she, Mrs. Blundell, a mere nobody—retired soap, in fact—had it in her power to countenance and patronise the wife of one of the most blue-blooded magnates in Steepshire, to take her under her protecting wing, give her some sage matronly advice, and, perchance, lead the wicked little stray lamb back into the fold of society; and thirdly, she came to satisfy the cravings of a sound

wholesome curiosity, to see for herself if all tales were true, to look with her own keen little eyes within the massive, rarely-opened, grand entrance-gates of Monkswood.

Now all speculation was completely set at rest; seeing was believing, and she beheld plain unvarnished facts. Never would she tolerate, patronise, or countenance her present hostess, never again darken her doors. Meanwhile, as she *was* here, she would make the most of her time, the best of her opportunities—were some of her charitable reflections. It was not every day that the very fount of scandal itself was laid open to her judicial eye. Here was no second-hand sight, but a most piquant improper little drama being played before her very face. In other words, she saw Lady Fairfax indisputably gay and pretty and well dressed, entertaining, in her husband's absence, three

men, all drinking tea or claret-cup, eating strawberries, and lolling on the grass, with the air of being most thoroughly at home; and there was an easy familiarity in their bearing towards each other, and specially towards their hostess, that was absolutely revolting to Mrs. Blundell's sense of propriety—the fair young man had actually rapped her over the knuckles with the sugar-tongs! Where was the old chaperon?—a myth or a dummy most probably; no creature of the female sex was visible, excepting that bold-looking red-haired young woman, who had been riding about the roads with Lady Fairfax the whole summer. These thoughts flashed like lightning through the good lady's mind as her eyes looked from one to the other, storing up her memory with a distinct mental photograph of the whole scene.

Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Blundell, and Miss

Ferrars occupied wicker garden-chairs ; the three gentlemen reposed in the foreground on the grass, but a sense of politeness had raised them to a sitting position. The weather, and tennis, as a popular and healthy game, had been alike exhausted, and conversation flagged visibly, in spite of Mary's gallant exertions.

"Why were you not at the grand cricket-match in Manister yesterday?" asked Mrs. Blundell in a loud authoritative tone.

"I don't know, I'm sure; we never thought of it," replied Miss Ferrars meekly.

"If you had it would not have done you much good," put in Geoffrey; "there are no carriage-horses. I never knew such a little duffer as Alice—sending them back to Looton," he added in a low aside.

"No carriage-horses!" echoed Mrs. Blundell, whose ears had at least caught *that*

sentence. "Dear me! you don't say so?" in a tone of deep commiseration. Then turning aside to her friend she whispered (?): "I heard he kept her tight, but I had no idea it was as bad as that."

Mary, Geoffrey, and Mr. Mayhew exchanged looks of unqualified amazement, and again an awkward silence ensued.

Mrs. Blundell once more proceeded in a louder and more *forte* key:

"I am surprised to see Lady Fairfax entertaining visitors; I had no idea she ever had people staying here."

"We are the exception that proves the rule," replied Geoffrey at the top of his naturally robust organ.

"Are *you* staying in the house—you two young men?" indicating Geoffrey and Reginald with a fat forefinger.

"Yes," returned Geoffrey, who had taken upon himself the task of answering.

"Ah! I do not think I know your face," to Geoffrey. "Are you in the Manister Bank?" patronisingly.

"No, I'm not;" rather sharply.

"Do you belong to this part of the country?"

"I have not that honour."

Mrs. Blundell gazed at him dreamily for nearly sixty seconds, and then a light seemed to break, for she exclaimed with the triumph of one who has grasped and presents an indisputable fact:

"I have it! You are the new young man in the Brewery."

"I am *not*," returned Geoffrey haughtily, and shouting with impressive distinctness. "I am not in the Brewery; and to save you the trouble of further speculation on my behalf, I may as well inform you that I'm in the cavalry."

"Ah!" There was a world of meaning

in that interjection—a meaning no pen could convey. "And he?" indicating Reginald with her sunshade.

"Cavalry officer also."

"Two cavalry officers," she repeated slowly, evidently rehearsing the intelligence for future occasions. If she had said, "Two returned convicts," her intonation could not have expressed deeper disapproval.

Whilst she was gratifying her thirst for information, her friend and Mrs. Mayhew were exchanging platitudes about flowers and fruit, the seasons of the year, and suchlike enthralling topics. They now made a combined effort to include her in their conversation. But it was of no avail; she evidently preferred to draw out Geoffrey, who seemed not merely willing, but delighted to oblige her.

Having replenished her cup with politest

alacrity, he resumed his seat in front of her *à la Turc*, and looked up at her with an amused twinkle in his mischievous little hazel eyes.

"Lady Fairfax is a very pretty young woman," she remarked to him over her teacup. A nod satisfied her of Geoffrey's cordial assent. "My son admires her immensely, so do all the gentlemen about here. She is rather what I call a gentleman's beauty," she added in a deprecating tone; "but still *I* think her decidedly good-looking," with an air that signified that Alice had now, and once for all, received an invaluable *cachet* of distinction.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," muttered Geoffrey.

"Frederick has been most anxious for me to call ever since he met Lady Fairfax one day out riding; he has been dying to make

her acquaintance. He has such an eye for beauty."

"He looks like it," assented Geoffrey in a cheerful shout.

"Be quiet, Geoffrey," muttered Reginald from behind.

"Are you any relation to Lady Fairfax, may I ask?"

"Yes, of course I am," roared Geoffrey.

"Both of you? Cousins did you say?"

"No, I did not; but I *am* her cousin."

"As much her cousin as I am," in a loud aside to her friend, and with a significance baffling all description.

Mary, seeing a storm brewing in Reginald's eyes, hastened to throw herself into the breach with an all-absorbing bazaar for bait. But no, the devoted old lady madly rushed on her fate. After a few brief replies she resumed:

"Did you say that this other gentleman was a cousin also?" regarding Geoffrey with a keen satirical eye.

"The interest you take in Lady Fairfax is most gratifying to the whole family. No, he is *not* her cousin, he is her husband."

"Not her cousin, not her husband! You need not tell me *that*; of course I know *that*," with insolent emphasis.

What was to be done with this terrible old woman, on whom her friend's signs and nudges were entirely thrown away?

At this instant, the game over, Alice, flushed and breathless, joined the group.

"I won, Geoff; only—fancy—that," she said, laying her hands on his shoulders in the excitement of her recent victory.

"Then, I suppose, there will be no living in the same house with you for the next week," remarked her cousin, moving so as

to make room for her beside him on the grass.

She looked utterly fagged and exhausted; her frail delicate appearance struck her husband forcibly, and for the first time he sprang up, dragged forward a garden-chair, and, taking her by the arm, pushed her into it with an air of loverlike solicitude—by no means lost on Mrs. Blundell—that had been foreign to his manner for many a long day.

"Thank you, Reginald," said Alice, sinking back into the seat with a sigh of relief and removing her hat. "To reward you for your politeness you shall have a little bit of my dress to sit on," spreading out the folds of her skirt.

"This is really too barefaced," cried Mrs. Blundell in one of her very loudest asides.

Then, getting up and extending her hand

very stiffly to Alice, she said in a most pointed unmistakable manner :

"It is quite time for me to be going, Lady Fairfax. I wish you good-afternoon. Come, Frederick," she called to her son, who was quaffing quantities of claret-cup, "I am ready," and with a comprehensive bow she was sailing off, but was arrested by Sir Reginald, who, leaping to his feet, confronted her.

"Before you leave, madam, will you have the goodness to tell me *who* you think I am?"

With a most evil and significant smile she was turning away, and metaphorically proceeding to shake the dust off her feet, when he again detained her.

"I am Lady Fairfax's *husband!*" he shouted. "What do you mean by your looks and innuendoes?"


"What is he saying, Frederick? I can't hear a word."

Reginald, turning to her son, with eyes ablaze and perfectly livid with passion, said to the electrified youth: "Be good enough to make your mother understand *who* I am; also make her clearly comprehend that neither Lady Fairfax nor myself have any further desire for her acquaintance. As for *you*"—with withering contempt—"I sincerely hope your curiosity has been gratified with regard to my wife's appearance. That there may be no delay in your departure"—looking at the three culprits sternly—"I shall myself go and order your carriage."

So saying, he took off his hat and walked away, leaving his visitors covered with amazement and confusion, Geoffrey in agonies of repressed laughter, and Miss

Ferrars and Mrs. Mayhew in a state of mental coma.

When this tirade had been interpreted to Mrs. Blundell—she had heard a good deal more than she pretended—she returned across the grass, from where she was awaiting her carriage, and humbly accosting Alice, overwhelmed her with excuses and apologies which there was no avoiding. The worldly-wise old lady said to herself: “It will never do to quarrel with the Fairfaxes—people of great wealth and influence, if all is as it seems. Supposing her outrageous mistake was to get about, what capital for her fellow-gossips! At all costs she would leave on friendly terms, and be literally stone deaf to every snub.” Summoning a sweet smile to her discomfited countenance, she implored Alice to intercede with her husband: “He looks as if he could refuse you *nothing*. Do make my peace with him; do



go and bring him to receive my most humble apologies. You must blame my unfortunate deafness, not me. I am not like other people, my dear young lady ; I am afflicted, and I frequently get hold of wrong impressions, which is my great misfortune—not, I am sure you will allow, my fault. I did hear a little idle whisper that you were rather—a—rather—a——” casting wildly about for a delicate way of expressing herself, and becoming crimson in the attempt—“ shall we say—fast young lady ? ”

“ Certainly, if you like ; and as long as I need not agree to the fact,” returned Alice with much composure.

“ Well, and finding you entertaining *three* cavalry officers, all on a most familiar footing, and imagining that your husband was still absent, I just thought, as a much older married woman ”—effusively—

"I would give you a little hint by my manner."

"In that she succeeded to a marvel," murmured Geoffrey.

"And I had no idea, no more than the man in the moon, of the real state of the case; nor that that dark distinguished-looking young man was Sir Reginald himself. And has he come to stay? and where has he been all this time?" she asked with affectionate solicitude. "However, I'll question you another time. Do run after him and obtain my forgiveness; I assure you I cannot leave the place without it," planting her parasol in a typical manner in the sod and waving Alice to the quest.

Alice most unwillingly set out to find her husband; he was in the yard composing himself with a cigar, and personally despatching the carriage. When he had

heard what she had to say he burst forth :

"Alice, I am astonished that you can ask such a thing. No, I certainly will not forgive them ; and if you say another word on the subject, I warn you that I shall begin to swear. I feel literally boiling with rage. Nothing less than a swim in the river will cool me," he observed, moving off.

"Stay one instant," she cried, running after him. "What *am* I to say to them, then ?"

"Say ? Oh say that I am in such a frightful rage you are afraid to go near me."

"But you are not quite so bad as all that, and I am not the least afraid of you," she returned with a smile.

"Are you not ?" he said, taking his cheroot out of his mouth and looking hard

at her. "Well, you may go back and tell them that I forgive them this time for your sake, since you say that nothing else will induce the old woman to quit the premises."

"You will not come back and say so yourself?" she asked insinuatingly.

"Not for ten thousand pounds; my forgiveness is but hollow. I should like nothing better than to give that young booby a thrashing that would surprise him, and to duck his mother in the pond. Such are my savage instincts. That is what I would do if I were a North American Indian and you were my squaw," he concluded with a grim smile.

"Reginald, I think you have taken leave of your senses."

"I see one thing very plainly," he continued, walking by her side to the edge of the lawn, "and that is, that I shall have to stay here much longer than

I intended, to rehabilitate you in the good opinion of society. So be prepared to enact with me in public the part of a most united happy couple. Do you understand?" he said, throwing the end of his cigar among the laurel bushes and coming to a full stop. "I will accompany you everywhere, carry your fans, shawls, bouquets, and other loose paraphernalia, and you"—very bitterly—"must assume a certain amount of interest and gratitude in return for my devoted solicitude. It will only be for a short time, but I see that it is an imperative though disagreeable necessity."

So saying, he turned abruptly away down a side walk, leaving Alice with tears of mortification smarting in her eyes.

CHAPTER X.

GEOFFREY MANŒUVRES.

AN hour later Reginald made his appearance in the library, where he found all the party assembled except Alice. Seeing him look round the room, Helen volunteered to tell him that she had gone to see a sick girl.

“What, at this time of night?”

“She went nearly an hour ago. She insisted on going, as she had not been to see Lucy Summers for some days. Alice has been so good to her all the summer—she is dying of consumption, poor girl.”

"It is quite time that Alice was home," said her husband with authority. "Half-past seven!" walking to the window and looking at his watch.

"Geoffrey promised to fetch her. You ought to start, Geoff," said Helen. "You know that this is market-night, and her abject fear of drunken men is no secret."

"She need not go as far as the road for them," remarked Reginald. "Just now I met an under-gardener endeavouring to walk up both sides of the avenue at once."

"Come, Geoff, you had better be off if you are going."

"Oh, I'm exhausted," replied Geoffrey. "I really could not think of taking any more exercise to-day."

"But you promised," urged his cousin emphatically.

"Promised, did I?" he replied, rising

languidly and deliberately arranging a cushion behind his head as he settled himself into the snuggest corner of the sofa. "Oh, Alice is accustomed to my promises by this time ; she knows they are like piecrust—made to be broken. Besides, Alice has a young and active husband. Pedestrian exercise is good for these Anglo-Indians ; let him go."

"But, Geoffrey——"

" 'But me no buts ;' I won't stir till the first bell rings, if then. That girl has already run me off my legs, and if she is mad enough to start for a two-miles' walk at this time of night, I am not. I prefer lying here"—shutting his eyes—"and thinking of dinner."

"Well, Geoffrey," exclaimed Reginald indignantly, taking up his hat, "if you won't go, *I* must. Where does this sick girl live?"

“Go out by the lower avenue, turn to the left, and follow your nose—it’s straight, isn’t it?—till you come to a plantation; go through that, and you will see a field, and in the field a cottage. And you had better look sharp, my dear boy; it’s getting late.”

As the door closed, Geoffrey started up and began capering about the room.

“Did I not do that splendidly?” he asked, stopping and rubbing his hands. “Haven’t I arranged for a nice little conjugal *tête-d-tête*, and isn’t he just swearing at me! Ten to one they will have a battle-royal, but anything is better than this armed peace; the way in which they avoid each other is a most beautiful study in tactics.”

“If you will take *my* advice,” observed Mrs. Mayhew, “you will not put your finger in the pie. Leave it to time, and it will all come right.”

"I don't agree with you there," replied Geoffrey. "Leave all to time and it will all go wrong, unless time is assisted by kind friends who make such judicious arrangements as this walk for example. They require as much looking after as if it were a half-developed love affair."

"Why should you busy yourself about them, an unfledged youngster like you?" asked the Honorable Mark peevishly.

Perfectly ignoring the question, Geoffrey stalked over to Helen, delightfully unconscious that an antimacassar was clinging to his coat-tails.

"Helen, now that we are here, '*en champ clos*'—or to translate it freely, Miss Ferrars and auntie are gone to dress, and the master and mistress are out—tell me honestly what you think about the business—will it all come right, or will he hook it off to the wars again?"

"What a way of expressing yourself! What polished ease! Well, if you want my opinion, you are quite welcome to it. I think the prospect is decidedly gloomy."

"You do? Well, listen to me—I am certain that his cool indifference is only assumed—is that nicely expressed?—and, as to her, I daresay she is quite ready to kiss and be friends. Suppose you break the ice with her, and I'll put out a feeler in his direction?"

"Helen," almost shouted her husband, "don't attempt to interfere, whatever Geoffrey may do—and he has assurance for twenty. But you'll see he will only burn his fingers," added Mr. Mayhew emphatically.

"Never mind him, Helen, you back *me* up," urged Geoffrey eagerly.

Helen merely shook her head in reply.

"Pouff! Mr. Mayhew," he expostulated

indignantly, "I had a much better opinion of you. You have no pluck!"

So saying, he lounged out of the room, banging the door loudly after him.

CHAPTER XI.

“MEET ME BY MOONLIGHT ALONE.”

IN the meantime, Sir Reginald was walking rapidly in the direction of the Summers' cottage. He reached the wood, which was thickly planted, and covered about an acre of ground. Spruce and fir made it dusky even in the daytime, and now in the twilight it was almost pitch-dark. Vaulting over the stile, he followed a path till he came to another stile, near which was the cottage, as Geoffrey had described.

“I've come far enough,” he said to himself, “and whilst I wait I'll have a smoke.”

So, leaning against a tree, he struck a light, and lit at least his sixth cigar that day. After five minutes or so he saw the cottage door open, and a white dog and a slender white figure emerge, both of which started off at a brisk run across the field, Alice collapsing to a sober walk as she neared the plantation. Stepping lightly over the stile, she advanced cautiously through the gloom, but descriing the spark at the end of her husband's cheroot, she exclaimed, as she sprang towards him and seized his arm :

“Oh, Geoff! you good boy, I was half afraid you would not come. I never was more glad to see you—I do so hate this lonely dark wood. They say a murder was committed here years ago,” she added, drawing closer to him and shuddering. “Come, we must be quick,” she chattered on; “I shall get into dreadful hot water, I am so late,

and I am so tired I can hardly crawl. Not that I mind, only Helen makes such a fuss if she sees me looking pale and sleepy. Why don't you speak, you lazy fellow? you are always smoking. Who would think you had such an arm," pinching him; "it's like a blacksmith's; the muscles feel as if they would burst the sleeve of your coat. I shall have no compunction in leaning pretty heavily, I can tell you."

"Are you dumb, Geoffrey; or are you in the sulks?"

A sudden idea struck her. It was *not* Geoffrey after all; perhaps—agonising thought!—it was some utter stranger whom she had thus cavalierly appropriated.

"What *have* I done?" she cried, horror-struck, and endeavouring to release her hand. "Please let me go, whoever you are," she pleaded piteously.

By this time they were close to the road,

and by the light of the newly-risen moon she saw her husband, and stood aghast.

"Geoffrey was, or said he was, too lazy to come," he remarked, helping her over the stile, "so I came as his substitute. I daresay you will find my arm quite as efficient a support," coolly replacing her hand.

"Oh, but indeed," struggling to withdraw it, and struggling in vain, "I never dreamt it was you, or I would not—I would not——"

"Have taken such a liberty," he interrupted. "No, I daresay not."

"There is no necessity to show me such politeness now," she exclaimed hotly; "it is only in public, as you said yourself, that you are to pay me any attention. Let my hand go, please; I can walk very well without any assistance."

"Nevertheless, as you admitted just now

that you were tired, you will have to do violence to your feelings for once and accept my arm, much as you dislike it; and if the high road is not a public place, I should like to know what is. Why did you not defer this visit till to-morrow? No wonder you are tired, after playing lawn-tennis all the afternoon. What can have possessed you to take such a walk?" he asked, slackening his pace.

"I could not have slept," she rejoined, "if I had not, for I had not been to see Lucy for a week, and my conscience was telling me I had neglected her."

"Oh then you *have* a conscience?" he observed gravely.

"Of course I have. What an odd question! Why do you ask?"

"Mere idle curiosity. Who is this Lucy Summers you have been to see?"

"A girl who is very ill; she thinks so

much of my visits, poor thing; but she does me far more good than I have it in my power to do her. She is truly fit for heaven, if anyone can be so."

"She is dying, is she not?"

"Yes, of consumption; and she is only my age. If I were like her I should be glad to go—only for Maurice."

A long and truly eloquent silence, lasting for fully a quarter of a mile. Alice thought of the last time they had walked together arm-in-arm up and down the long gallery at Looton, the evening before he had started for Cannes. What an age it seemed since then! What changes had occurred! He was more changed than all else, she felt, as she stole a glance at him. His clear-cut profile looked coldly severe in the moonlight, his eyes were fixed on the horizon, and his thoughts seemed at least a thousand

miles away. The moon, which had risen behind the park trees, was now sailing proudly overhead, and looked down full-faced on this strangely-silent couple.

The rattle of an approaching dog-cart and the sound of a horse's hoofs aroused them from their reflections.

Two young men in evening dress, evidently going out to dinner. They favoured Alice with a hard stare, and Reginald with a knowing look, as they dashed past.

"Pretty girl!" and "Lucky dog!" was borne upon the breeze as they rounded a corner, leaving behind them a cloud of dust.

As Alice put up her hand to ward off a volume of it, her wedding-ring glittered in the moonlight, and, for the first time, caught her husband's eye.

"So you have replaced your wedding-ring, I see," he observed, as they entered the avenue-gates.

"I have," she replied in a low voice.

"What an interesting ceremony it must have been," he remarked sarcastically.

"What *do* you mean?" asked Alice, gazing up at him with unrestrained astonishment.

"Did you swear to love, honour, and obey Alice Fairfax? I have often heard of people being wedded to self, but such an utterly barefaced proceeding as yours I never met with before."

Alice had never thoroughly realised till now how bitterly he had resented her treatment of his wedding-ring.

"Where is my own ring?" she asked with a reckless boldness that surprised herself.

"I wear it on my watch-chain."

"Will you ever give it back to me?" she inquired, more and more amazed at her own audacity.

He paused and stood still for a moment, and eyeing his wife with cool unspeakable amazement, said :

"Will I give you back your wedding-ring? When you deserve it I may ; but," he added slowly and impressively, "as far as I can judge at present, that will *never* be."

He felt her little hand tremble on his arm, he saw her lips quiver, a mist come over her deep-fringed eyes. Seized with sudden compunction, he said :

"I am afraid I am always giving you rude brusque answers, but you brought this on yourself. The past three years have not been calculated to improve a man's temper, have they?"

She looked up.

"You know you don't deserve your wedding-ring, do you?" said he, taking her hand. "Do you?" he added pertinaciously.

"I suppose not," faltered Alice, gulping down her tears with a painful effort.

"You *suppose* not!" he echoed impatiently. "Well, I am very certain you don't; and the ring is likely to remain in my keeping."

By this time they had reached the hall door-steps, where Geoffrey, in full evening dress and the usual flower in his button-hole, was awaiting them.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "So you have really come home. Well, you did not hurry yourselves," he said, escorting them into the hall. "We began to think you had eloped—gone off together into some elegant retirement in the style of a second honeymoon."

"Geoffrey !" cried Alice, in an agony of blushes.

"Don't 'Geoffrey' me, my good girl, but go and get ready for dinner as quickly as you can ; I'm *starving*."

END OF VOL. II.





